

Graduate School of Systems and Information Engineering

Introductory Technical Writing

Essential skills for
academic writing

0AL0000

Topic 1: Academic Style

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Academic Style – what is it?

- Academic writing style
- The appropriate way of writing for your academic context
- Varies across discipline & individual
- No 'one' academic style
- ...some general guidelines

Academic Style – what is it?

- Generally, attempt to be..
 - *accurate, impersonal and objective*
- A rather **formal** vocabulary is used.
- Personal pronouns like ‘I’ and idioms are used less than in other writing.

Task 1: A suitable academic style

1. Study this paragraph and underline examples of poor style in the text. In a small group, discuss why they are poor style.
2. Now match the twelve examples of poor academic style (1-12) with the reasons below (a-j). Some will match more than one time.
3. Discuss how you would rewrite the paragraph using academic style based on the problems identified above. What other changes would be appropriate?

How to make people work harder is a topic that lots of people have written about in the last few years. There are lots of different theories etc and I think some of them are ok. When we think about this we should remember the old proverb, that you can lead a horse to water but you can't make it drink. So how do we increase production? It's quite a complex subject but I'll just talk about a couple of ideas.

Task 1: Commentary

How to make people work harder is a topic that lots of people have written about in the last few years. There are lots of different theories etc and I think some of them are ok. When we think about this we should remember the old proverb, that you can lead a horse to water but you can't make it drink. So how do we increase production? It's quite a complex subject but I'll just talk about a couple of ideas.

Imprecise; long → Replace verb phrase with noun phrase

Motivation is a topic ... / workplace motivation

Task 1: Commentary

How to make people work harder is a topic that **lots of people** have written about in the last few years. There are **lots of** different theories etc and I think some of them are ok. When we think about this we should remember the old proverb, that you can lead a horse to water but you can't make it drink. So how do we increase production? It's quite a complex subject but I'll just talk about a couple of ideas.

Vague → give names

'lots' is informal → a number of / many

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Vague → give dates

Task 1: Commentary

How to make people work harder is a topic that lots of people have written about in the last few years. There are lots of different theories **etc** and I think some of them are ok. When we think about this we should remember the old proverb, that you can lead a horse to water but you can't make it drink. So how do we increase production? It's quite a complex subject but I'll just talk about a couple of ideas.

Avoid 'etc.' and 'and so on ...'

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Too personal

Too informal

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Avoid proverbs or similar expressions

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(Generally) avoid rhetorical questions

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Avoid contractions (e.g. it is → it's; we are → we're)

Too informal

How might we rewrite it?

How to make people work harder is a topic that lots of people have written about in the last few years. There are lots of different theories etc and I think some of them are ok. When we think about this we should remember the old proverb, that you can lead a horse to water but you can't make it drink. So how do we increase production? It's quite a complex subject but I'll just talk about a couple of ideas.

- Many people have written about workplace motivation in recent years (e.g. XXXXX).
- Much has been written about workplace motivation in recent years (e.g. XXXXX).
- Workplace motivation has been the focus of much research in recent years (e.g. XXXXX)

How might we rewrite it?

- How to make people work harder is a **topic** that lots of people have written about in the last few years. **There are lots of different theories etc and I think some of them are ok.** ~~When we think about this we should remember the old proverb, that you can lead a horse to water but you can't make it drink.~~ So how do we increase production? It's quite a **complex subject** but I'll just talk about a couple of ideas.
- Much has been written about workplace motivation in recent years. **There are a number of different theories on this complex topic.**

How might we rewrite it?

- How to make people work harder is a topic that lots of people have written about in the last few years. There are lots of different theories etc and I think some of them are ok. When we think about this we should remember the old proverb, that you can lead a horse to water but you can't make it drink. So how do we increase production? It's quite a complex subject but I'll just talk about a couple of ideas.
- In this paper I will discuss aspects of these theories and how they can be used to increase production.
- This paper will discuss aspects of these theories and how they can be used to increase production.

So what we get is:

- Much has been written about workplace motivation in recent years. There are a number of different theories on this complex topic. In this paper I will discuss aspects of these theories and how they can be used to increase production.
- Original version 81 words
- Rewritten version 39 words

1. Some guidelines

- a) Do not use idiomatic or colloquial vocabulary, e.g. *kids*, *boss*. Instead use *children*, *manager*.

b) Use vocabulary accurately. There is a difference between *law* and *rule*, *currency* and *money*, or *governance* and *government*, which you are expected to know.

c) Be as **precise** as possible when dealing with facts or figures. Avoid phrases such as *about a hundred*. If it is necessary to estimate numbers use *approximately* rather than *about*.

d) Conclusions should use tentative language. Avoid absolute statements such as *unemployment causes crime*. Instead use cautious phrases: *unemployment may cause crime* or *tends to cause crime*.

e) **Generally**, avoid adverbs / phrases that show your personal attitude, e.g. *luckily*, *remarkably*, *amazingly*.

f) Do not contract verb forms, e.g. *don't*, *can't*. Use the full form: *do not*, *cannot*.

g) Although academic English tends to use the passive voice more than Standard English, it should not be over-used. Both have their place. Compare:

Galileo discovered the moons of Jupiter.

The moons of Jupiter were discovered by Galileo.

How does the focus of these two similar sentences differ?

h) Avoid the following:

- *like* for introducing examples – use *such as* or *for instance*.
- *thing* and combinations *nothing* or *something* – use *factor*, *issue* or *topic*.
- *lots of* – use *a significant/considerable number*.
- *little/big* – use *small/large*.
- ‘get’ phrases such as *get better/worse* – use *improve* and *deteriorate*.
- *good/bad* are simplistic – use *positive/negative*, e.g. *the changes had several positive aspects*

i) Generally avoid forms such as *What were the reasons for the decline in traffic collisions?* Instead use statements: *There were four main reasons for the decline...*

2. Some guidelines

j) When writing lists, avoid using *etc.* or *and so on*. Insert *and* before the last item, e.g. *The main products were pharmaceuticals, electronic goods and confectionery.*

2. Some guidelines

k) It is best to avoid using many two-word verbs such as *go on* or *bring up* if there is a suitable synonym – use *continue* or *raise*.

Task 2: Practice exercise - style

In the following eight sentences, underline examples of bad style and rewrite them in a more suitable way.

1) What are the biggest things that cause global warming?

The main causes of global warming are . . .

2) Unfortunately, I think there's a good chance of cyber crime increasing.

It seems likely that cyber crime will increase.

3) Lots of people think that the green technologies can replace nuclear power.

It is widely believed that green technology can replace nuclear power.

4) A few years ago the price of property in Japan went down a lot.

After 1989 the price of Japanese property fell sharply.

Task 2: Practice exercise - style

In the following sentences, underline examples of bad style and rewrite them in a more suitable way.

5) You can't always trust the numbers in that report.

The numbers in that report are unreliable.

6) Sadly, I think this solution won't work.

It seems unlikely that this solution will work.

7) They did some research to see if the system works.

They carried out (undertook) research to assess the system.

8) If you use your mobile phone when driving you'll have a crash.

Using a mobile phone when driving can increase the risk of collision.

2. Avoiding repetition and redundancy



- *Saying the same thing again ...*
- *Giving irrelevant information ...*

2. Avoiding repetition and redundancy

- Most family businesses employ less than ten people.
These businesses ...
- → Most family businesses employ less than ten people.
These firms...
- Business schools in Spain are cheaper than business schools in the UK.
- → Business schools in Spain are cheaper than in the UK.
- Homelessness is a global problem in the whole world.
- → Homelessness is a global problem.

Task 3: Practice exercise - style

In the following text, remove all repetition and redundancy, rewriting where necessary.

Currently these days, fast food is growing in popularity. Fast food is a kind of food that people can buy or cook quickly. This paper examines the advantages of fast food and the drawbacks of fast food. First above all, fast food is usually tasty. Most of the people who work in offices are very busy, so that they do not have time to go to their homes for lunch. But the people who work in offices can eat tasty and delicious food in McDonalds' restaurants, which are franchised in hundreds of countries around the world. In addition, the second benefit of fast food is its cheapness. As it is produced in large quantities, this high volume means that the companies can keep costs down. As a result fast food is usually less expensive than a meal in a conventional restaurant.

Task 3: Practice exercise - style

In the following text, remove all repetition and redundancy, rewriting where necessary.

Currently these days, fast food is growing in popularity. **Fast food** is a kind of food that people can buy or cook quickly. This paper examines the advantages of **fast food** and the drawbacks of **fast food**. First **above all**, **fast food** is usually tasty. Most of **the people who work in offices** are very busy, so that they do not have time to go to their homes for lunch. But **the people who work in offices** can eat **tasty and delicious** food in McDonalds' restaurants, **which are franchised in hundreds of countries around the world**. **In addition**, the second benefit of fast food is its cheapness. As it is produced in large quantities, **this high volume means** that the companies can keep costs down. As a result fast food is usually less expensive than a meal in a conventional restaurant.

3. Varying sentence length

Short sentences - clear and easy to read:

- Car scrappage schemes have been introduced in many countries.

Too many short sentences - monotonous:

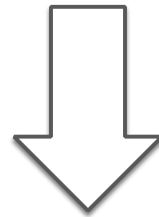
- Car scrappage schemes have been introduced in many countries. They offer a subsidy to buyers of new cars. The buyers must scrap an old vehicle. The schemes are designed to stimulate the economy. They also increase fuel efficiency.

Long sentences – can be more interesting but difficult to write and read:

- *Car scrappage schemes, which are designed to stimulate the economy and also increase fuel efficiency, offer a subsidy to buyers of new cars, who must scrap an old vehicle, and have been introduced in many countries.*

3. Varying sentence length

- Car scrappage schemes, which are designed to stimulate the economy and also increase fuel efficiency, offer a subsidy to buyers of new cars, who must scrap an old vehicle, and have been introduced in many countries.



- Car scrappage schemes offer a subsidy to buyers of new cars who scrap an old vehicle. **Schemes of this sort**, which are designed to stimulate the economy and also increase fuel efficiency, have now been introduced in many countries.

3. Varying sentence length

Effective writing normally uses a mixture of **long and short sentences.**

Task 4: Varying sentence length 1

Rewrite the following paragraph so that instead of six short sentences there are two long and two short sentences.

Worldwide, enrolments in higher education are increasing. In Western countries over half of all young people enter college. Similar trends are seen in China and South America. This growth has put financial strain on state university systems. Many countries are asking students and parents to contribute. This leads to a debate about whether students or society benefit from tertiary education.

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Task 4: Varying sentence length 1

Rewrite the following paragraph so that instead of six short sentences there are two long and two short sentences.

Worldwide, enrolments in higher education are increasing. In Western countries over half of all young people enter college while similar trends are seen in China and South America. This growth has put financial strain on state university systems. Many countries are asking students and parents to contribute. This leads to a debate about whether students or society benefit from tertiary education.

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Task 5: Varying sentence length 2

The following sentence is too long. Divide it into shorter ones. Make any other changes that you think are appropriate.

The discipline of telecommunications engineering, including the designing, installing and overseeing of telecommunications equipment and facilities, such as complex electronic switching systems, copper wire telephone facilities and fiber optics, is the enhancement of telecommunications systems through the bringing together of electrical engineering and computer science, from the basic circuit design to strategic mass developments.

Task 5: Varying sentence length 2

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Telecommunications engineering is a discipline that brings together ... in order to...

The work ranges from ...

The work of a telecommunications engineer includes ...

Task 5: Varying sentence length 2

The following sentence is too long. Divide it into shorter ones. Make any other changes that you think are appropriate.

Telecommunications engineering is a discipline that brings together electrical engineering and computer science in order to enhance telecommunications systems. The work involved ranges from basic circuit design to strategic mass developments. The work of a telecommunications engineer includes designing and overseeing the installation of telecommunications equipment such as complex electronic switching systems, copper wire telephone facilities and fiber optics.

Summary

- Generally, attempt to be *accurate, impersonal and objective*.
- Develop an awareness of formality
- Avoid repetition and redundancy
- Vary your sentence length

HOMEWORK

Self-study exercises

1. What is special about academic English
2. Key Nouns