

Academic Style and Register

Objectives

When you have finished this section, you will be better able to:

- recognize instances of informal language in academic writing
- understand what constitutes an academic writing style
- avoid common errors connected with register and style

Before class

Survey the websites and take note of anything new or unfamiliar.

1. pp13-15 Academic Writing UTS

<http://www.lib.uts.edu.au/sites/default/files/attachments/page/Academic%20Writing%20Guide%20Part%201%20-%20Academic%20Writing.pdf>

2. Module 2: Writing in an Academic Style

https://sydney.edu.au/stuserv/documents/learning_centre/M2.pdf

3. 12 Common Errors in Academic English -

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mZQgd2sPxp3>.

Introduction

You might recall from the class discussions in Week 2 how, despite the obvious linguistic commonalities, there are, in fact, many different varieties of written English. These context-dependent varieties are otherwise known as *genres*. Examples from the Tutorial notes included narratives, procedures, informative reports and explanatory texts. Other examples may include expository texts, journalistic articles or personal recountings. You might also recall that these genres are also characterised by variations in aspects such as purpose, structure and language. It is variations in the latter, language, that this tutorial is particularly concerned with and in particular in the deployment of an appropriate tone for academic writing. This tone is known as the **register** of a text and it refers to the degree of formality used by the writer. In academic writing, the register is usually formal and so writers have to be mindful of the language they select in advancing their arguments. This could mean that even if a piece of writing is grammatically correct, it may nonetheless convey an inappropriate tone, resulting in a text that may sound unintentionally casual, unsophisticated or unprofessional. The converse is also true: language that might be appropriate in an academic context may sound too formal or pretentious if used in less formal circumstances.

A well-developed academic register and writing style often incorporates characteristics such as appropriate verb choice, the avoidance of clichés, hyperbole and vague language, and relatively little repetition and redundancy. The following exercises will help sensitise you to some of these features as you come to write your essays.

1. Verb choice and academic register:

□ Even though they may be used in a manner that is grammatically correct, many verbs lack an academic register and can therefore sound informal when included in written text. Some examples include verbs plus prepositions, phrasal verbs or verbs with journalistic connotations. Such verbs are therefore better suited to other, non-academic genres.

Consider the following examples and suggest alternatives for the underlined items.

Ex. Schooling adolescents often have their mind constantly stimulated by the rigorous education curriculum they go through.

Suggested rephrase: Schooling adolescents often have their minds constantly stimulated by the rigorous education curriculum they experience.

1. Our IT capabilities need to be beefed up.

2. Moore hedge fund has recently brought up several important issues and is now actively staking out other energy companies for investment opportunities.

3. Many companies now use customer loyalty schemes, so they are able to set up a base of trusting customers who can then pick up priority offers.

4. An improved solution would be for governments to come up with better policies to make public education and vaccination programs come together.

5. Fabricated news can cause damage to persons or organizations if not addressed thoroughly. At present, the governing bodies from various countries have come out with solutions to address this issue. This essay will address the problem that arises from fake news, its impact as well as solutions put in place to tackle the issues.

6. This shows that members of these suppressed groups are extremely sensitive to their cultural heritage being stepped into by others and how such a simple act can spark unhappiness between the dominant and the marginalized groups.

7. Celebration of cultural festivals, or visits to local museums are the platforms to boost and showcase the beauty of traditional Malay attires to the younger generations.

8. Peer review is challenging because it is difficult to know what mistakes to look out for in a colleague's work. Despite this, it is possible to point out some ideas that lack clarity and relevance and give constructive feedback.

9. With a capable leader being taken down by fake news, a country could possibly be passing up a better future and better prospects.

2. Clichés

□ In contrast to informal-sounding verbs, clichés are overused words and expressions. Although they are not grammatically incorrect, they often introduce or conclude sentences in an overgeneralizing or vague way. In academic writing, clichés could either be paraphrased in a more academic fashion or simply deleted.

Watch the following video and note the speaker's advice on how to avoid clichés in your writing. Can you recall any specific tips?

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qxv_aaSf2U4

Now consider the following examples and suggest suitable amendments:

Ex: As the famous saying goes, smart device users can overcome their social shyness by 'Disconnecting in order to Connect'.

Suggested rephrase: Smart device users can overcome their social shyness by choosing to communicate in person rather than virtually.

1. As time goes on, 'cultural appropriation' has evolved from a topic of rhetorical criticism in academia into an issue triggering internet outrage and oversensitivity.

2. Globalisation is like a double-edged sword: although it has numerous benefits, it has also brought adverse consequences, such as global warming. Therefore, one can conclude that globalisation can be both a boon and a bane.

3. All in all/ In a nutshell/At the end of the day, fake news will only be able to contribute to racial tension when the people within the country lack trust and are divided, making it easy to spread unhappiness between different races and religions.

4. It should be illegal to don the Native American headdresses without permission from certified Native American representatives. Either way/ With that, unless people act, such cultural appropriation will continue to remain unresolved in the coming years ahead.

5. Essay writing, just like many other things, is a skill learned with practice. During this course, the academic dos and don'ts should become clearer.

6. With the development of society nowadays due to communications technology, the world has become more interconnected. As cultural fusion has become a world phenomenon, subsequent problems have also emerged. One such problem that has recently attracted attention is cultural appropriation.

7. As we know, things are always changing so fast in today's interconnected world.

8. Fashion, a trend that will always be changing all over the world, need acts of cultural appropriation to continue evolving.

9. Of course, there is no denying social media platforms can be used as a medium to discredit a politician, allowing another party to dominate the elections

3. Hyperbole

□ Hyperbole is the use of exaggeration as a rhetorical device or figure of speech. Although it is legitimate (and grammatically correct) to employ feature this in rhetoric, poetry and oratory, it is often out-of-place in academic writing as it tends to evoke strong feelings and impressions. Academic writing, in contrast, is primarily evidence-based, and therefore subjective, value-laden language does not fit easily in the genre.

Watch the video and note the use of exaggerated language. What examples can you recall?
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rUzScx6_IWg

Consider the following sentences on the topic of smartphone addiction and identify any words or phrases that possibly convey a sense of exaggeration. Suggest alternatives where possible:

Ex. Even though smartphones can bring convenience, their high levels of usage could lead to devastating consequences such as smartphone addiction.

Suggested rephrase: Even though smartphones can bring convenience, their high usage could lead to adverse consequences such as smartphone addiction.

1. Vast numbers of people in the world use a smartphone (Murphy, 2017). So many have become addicted to smartphones due to the convenience that they bring as well as the astonishing features that come with their designs.
2. The over-usage of smartphones then snowballs into an avalanche of addiction over time. Furthermore, the constant buzz of social media and email notifications leads to never-ending distraction.
3. The risk of eye damage increases if one checks his smartphone excessively. The deadly culprit behind this eye damage is the blue-violet light that is emitted by devices with LED screens, such as smartphones (Buckley, 2014).
4. Incredible improvements in the functionalities of smartphones have led to unbelievable gains in popularity. However, one problem lies in the vast affordances smartphones provide to people from all walks of life: smartphones grant us instant access to information, ease of communication and even billion-dollar transactions - all in a millisecond. This has gradually promoted smartphones to a glorified state of indispensability in our daily lives. Teenagers are especially vulnerable to this over-dependency and become victims of smartphone addiction.
5. Gradual loss of vision, dealing with dry eyes and headaches, and having ciliary muscle spasm are just a few consequences of smartphone addiction. However, the exponential increase in number of things that can be done on the phone makes it almost inevitable to refrain from using it. Despite that, vision loss interferes with a person's ability to complete basic tasks such as using the telephone or doing housework, and can even lead to death.
6. Smartphone addiction has altered the way children interact with each other and now there is a huge gap between the amount of digital and human interaction that children engage in. The consequences of this addiction are dire.

4. Repetition of words and phrases

□ Although it is useful (and necessary) to remind readers of the ideas and evidence which support your central argument, try to avoid overusing words and phrases in your work, especially where they occur in close proximity. Not to do so runs the risk of your work sounding monotonous and repetitive. Instead, employ the techniques of paraphrasing, lexical chaining and substitution in order to add variation to your academic style (see Week 5 Tutorial 1 on Writing cohesive texts). Consider the following excerpts (based on the previous semester's theme of smartphone addiction) and identify any repetitive content. Suggest possible amendments to improve the texts.

Ex. Adolescent students are often willing to stay up past their bedtime or be woken up by social media notifications notifying them that their friend has replied.

Suggested rephrase: Adolescent students are often willing to stay up past their bedtime or be woken up by social media notifications informing them that their friend has replied.

1. Digitalisation is a global phenomenon that has prompted significant adoption of internet-connected digital technologies, with its most coveted by-product – the digital smartphone.

2. Smartphone addiction is especially problematic for growing children as the lack of human interaction due to excessive usage is detrimental for their development. There are two ways smartphone addiction can cause a lack of human interaction: firstly, spending too much time on smartphones and secondly, the replacement of human interaction with online interaction.

3. However, even though smartphones can bring convenience, the high usage of smartphones could lead to undesirable consequences such as smartphone addiction. Priddy (2015) mentions that smartphones have become such an important component in our daily lives, that some are at a loss without their smartphones. Without their smartphones, some would experience restlessness and the inability to function well.

4. One current government policy that aims to foster stronger familial bonds is the annual 'Make Time for Family Weekend', a weekend dedicated for families to connect with their

immediate family members (Ministry of Communication and Information, 2017). Therefore, 'Make Time for Family Weekend' offers parents a family-friendly environment that allows parents to enjoy more family time and not be reminded of their daily workload.

5. Redundancy in academic writing

□ Although often related to instances of repetition discussed above, redundancy in academic writing is characterised by the use of superfluous words that add little additional content or value to the points being argued. Similarly to repetition, redundancy does not necessarily imply the existence of any grammatical error. Rather, a writer has to judge whether they have provided an appropriate level of detail to support their underlying point sufficiently; i.e. not too much and not too little. Although redundancy can be difficult to identify, such language can result in a lack of succinctness and give the impression of wordiness. Since readers are likely to have limited time and patience when trying to understand your work, it is worth taking the time to critically examine your own writing and question the extent to which you have been efficient and clear before you upload. As with all the stylistic features discussed in this handout, you will gradually become better at recognizing such instances through looking at your own work and that of others, and querying what you read.

Read the following excerpts (similarly based on the theme of smartphone addiction) and identify any redundant content. Suggest possible amendments to improve the texts.

Ex. LaMotte (2017) and Priddy (2014) note that human over-dependency on smartphones can affect melatonin production, a hormone found in the body that helps to regulate sleep, due to the blue light emitted from device screens. Moreover, this light can lead to an increase in gamma-Aminobutyric acid (GABA), a neurotransmitter in the cortex that inhibits activation of neurotransmitter glutamate-glutamine, another neurotransmitter that nerve cells use to send signals (LaMotte, 2014). LaMotte (2014) further explains that imbalances in levels of GABA and glutamate-glutamine cause the slowing of neurons and finally give rise to

paradoxical anxiety- a side effect that leads to insomnia. This increase in GABA combined with the lack of melatonin production due to the high level of blue light exposure has a significant impact on a person's sleep cycle and in turn their energy levels during the following day.

Suggested rephrase: LaMotte (2017) and Priddy (2014) note that human over-dependency on smartphones can affect melatonin production, a hormone found in the body that helps to regulate sleep, due to the blue light emitted from device screens. Moreover, this light can lead to an increase in other neurotransmitters which, when combined with the lack of melatonin production, can have a significant impact on a person's sleep cycle and in turn their energy levels during the following day.

1. Mobile phones were once used solely to fulfil the function of allowing communication to take place regardless of physical location. Over time, they have evolved and have been continually made smarter by man. Now, we call them "smartphones", which are mobile phones that are capable of performing more than the traditional function of communication, as they now have multiple main functions, much like a computer. A typical smartphone has a touchscreen, Internet access, and various applications in order to ease communication and provide updated news and make it more convenient for work to be done on-the-go.

2. Growing up in a high-tech environment, most teenagers, who are those aged between thirteen and nineteen years old, own a smartphone. In America, a survey conducted by Pew Research Center discovers that "73 percent of teens have access to a smartphone, and 92 percent of them say that they go online every single day" (Cohut, 2017). With smartphone addiction increasingly becoming an issue to be concerned with, teenagers need be paid attention to. As they are still growing, the over usage of mobile devices can hinder the development of the teenagers. This essay will thus examine the neurological changes to teenagers caused by the excessive usage of smartphones and the impact on their emotional

well-being. The effectiveness of cognitive behavioural treatments that address this issue will be evaluated, and improved measures will be suggested to combat the issue.

5. Other features of an Academic Style

Below are some aspects of written English, which may or may not be considered as formal by the academic community.

Where would you place each one on a continuum of 1 (informal) to 5 (formal)? What observations can you make as to the register of these features?

(a) Placing exclamation marks (!) and ellipsis (. . .) at the end of sentences

(b) Using the passive voice instead of the active voice

It was suggested that the developing world will require in excess of US\$100 billion in aid every year to cope with the effects of global warming. (Passive)

Some observers suggest that the developing world will require in excess of US\$100 billion in aid every year to cope with the effects of global warming. (Active)

(c) Using expressions or phrases such as:

lots of

what's more

looks like it

didn't yield any new results

not . . . much

doesn't have many solutions

You can see the results in Table 2.

a great many

moreover

it seems to be so

yielded no new results

little

NUS students are such busy bees

has few solutions

(d) Using spellings that imitate speech (*wanna*) or employing non-standard grammar (*I ain't got no idea*)

(e) Using abbreviations and short forms, such as *aka*, *Engin*, *etc.*

(f) Using rhetorical questions, e.g. What can be done to mitigate climate change?

(g) Incorporating sentences without verbs into the text. For example: *Not so. Of course. Like that.*

(h) Using personal pronouns: *we/us/our/you/your/yours/I/me/mine*

Task: Reexamine your Synthesis Task for instances of informality, clichés, hyperbole, repetition and redundancy. How might you rephrase your work to address these points?