

Lecture 14 : Writing with a good style

Style is one aspect of academic discourse. Style is an essential component of effective writing. It refers to the manner in which ideas are expressed, encompassing the distinctive features, tone, and presentation of a text. As defined by Madhuka (2005, p. 84), style represents “the manner of writing. It constitutes the collective characteristics of writing, impression or way of presenting things.” Stylistic awareness is therefore crucial in writing. Learners must choose words that enhance the clarity, strength, and impact of their text, as word choice plays a significant role in capturing and sustaining the reader’s attention. However, style extends beyond vocabulary; it also involves tone, sentence structure, and the relationships between words within a given context. Importantly, mastering style is particularly challenging because different academic discourse communities adhere to specific stylistic conventions, including preferred terminology and structural norms (Zeidler, 2005). Understanding and adapting to these conventions is vital for students aiming to write effectively within various academic fields.

Defining what constitutes ‘good style’ in writing is inherently complex and often elusive.

It is not only difficult to pinpoint the exact features that make a style effective, but even

more challenging to articulate them clearly. This complexity is compounded by

the evolving nature of stylistic norms—what was once considered good style may

no longer be viewed as appropriate in contemporary academic contexts.

Despite these shifts, academic writing is still governed by certain expectations regarding how ideas should be presented. Consequently, it becomes necessary to attempt to describe what is meant by 'good style' or, at the very least, what is regarded as acceptable practice within academic discourse.

Elements of Academic Style

1. Level of formality (register)

One thing that distinguishes academic writing from other types of writing is its level of formality, sometimes called 'register'. Academic writing requires a more formal style that can be seen in:

- a. *The type of vocabulary used (formal)*: although it is important not to make your writing unnecessarily complex, nevertheless in academic writing there are certain words that may often be preferable to their more casual counterparts. Here are just a few commonly used examples:

saw/noticed → observed

shows → illustrates, indicates

so → therefore, consequently

but → however, nevertheless, although

people → subjects

big → large, considerable, substantial long

→ extensive, extended

seems → appears

important → significant

The following written sentence would be perfectly acceptable for instance:

E.g.1. He tried to show that it was possible to lose weight and eat his favorite food.

He attempted to prove that losing weight whilst eating his favorite meals was achievable.

E.g.2. Roberts (2007) says that lower house prices do not affect you if you are not planning to sell your property.

Roberts (2007) claims that lower house prices do not affect homeowners if they are not planning to sell their property.

N.B: The reason for using formal expressions is not because academic language is pompous, but because it is clearer

b. The avoidance of first person singular ('I'): 'I' in academic writing is avoided

The following table shows some examples of ways writers typically depersonalize their writing.

PERSONAL	IMPERSONAL
<i>I</i>	<i>The author/This writer</i>
<i>I found that ...</i>	<i>It was found that ...</i>
<i>I was surprised to observe that ...</i>	<i>The observation that ... was surprising.</i>
<i>I found the results interesting because ...</i>	<i>The results were interesting in that ...</i>
<i>I decided to use ...</i>	<i>The decision was made to use ...</i>
<i>I think/believe that ...</i>	<i>It might be argued that ...</i>
	<i>It would seem reasonable to argue that ...</i>
<i>I take this to mean</i>	<i>This suggests/indicates that ...</i>
	<i>This can be taken to mean that ...</i>

- c. **Absence of slang and other more casual forms:** slang is normally not used in academic writing, unless of course the language itself is the focus of attention, as it might be in the case of a study on literature or linguistics, for example. It is a good idea to check any language you are uncertain about.
- d. **Absence of contracted forms:** contracted forms are usually associated with an informal writing style. It is best to avoid using contracted forms in academic writing; instead use complete forms (e.g. “it is” *not* “it’s”; “that is” *not* “that’s”; “they are” *not* “they’re”; “result is” *not* “result’s”). An exception to this rule concerns the quoting of subjects. For example, if subjects used in your study have provided written data, then you should record it exactly as it was given to you, contractions and all. Similarly, when transcribing (recording in writing) spoken data such as interviews, you have a duty to do this as accurately as possible and you may therefore need to use contracted forms.
- e. **Absence of Interjections/Hesitation fillers:** Words such as: *um*, *well*, *you know*.
..) which might be common in the spoken language are omitted.
- f. A number of phrasal or prepositional verbs are more suitable for an informal style and are therefore inappropriate in academic writing, e.g.

formal conduct discover invest	informal carry out find out look into
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- g. **Euphemisms (words which are thought to be less unpleasant and less direct)** are often used informally but should be avoided in academic writing. For example:

direct to die	euphemism to pass away
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totellies/to lie ill old person	totell falsehoods/fibs poorly senior citizen
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Task : Compare four pairs of sentences. It will not be difficult for you to decide which are written in formal style and which in informal. What features of formality or informality can you find in the sentences?

<p>1) Thanks a lot for the invitation, but I'm afraid I can't come.</p> <p>2) I really can't comment on the findings of this paper.</p> <p>3) Will you write me back as soon as possible? I am waiting for your reply.</p> <p>4) If you need any further details, please let me know. With best wishes, Alex.</p>	<p>1. Thank you very much for your kind invitation. I regret it will not be possible for me to come.</p> <p>2. I am not currently in a position to provide any comments on the findings of this paper.</p> <p>3. I would greatly appreciate hearing from you at your earliest convenience.</p> <p>4. I should be pleased to provide any further details you request. Sincerely yours, Alex Brown.</p>
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h. Avoid Adverbs in initial or final positions (the middle position is preferable).

<p>1) <i>Then</i> it will be shown how teachers can utilize this method.</p> <p>2) This work relies on previous research <i>heavily</i>.</p>	<p>1) It will <i>then</i> be shown how teachers can utilize this method.</p> <p>2) This work <i>heavily</i> relies on previous research.</p>
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i. Avoid inappropriate negative forms.

not...any The investigation <i>didn't</i> yield <i>any</i> new results.	No The investigation yielded <i>no</i> new results.
not...many The book <i>doesn't</i> raise <i>many</i> important issues.	Few The book raises <i>few</i> important issues.
not...much The government <i>won't</i> do <i>much</i> to support universities in the near future.	Little The government will do <i>little</i> to support universities in the near future.

j. Avoid Figures at the beginning of the sentence.

97 people visited the museum last week.	<i>Ninety-seven</i> people visited the museum last week. Last week 97 people visited the museum.
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Task: Reduce the informality of each sentence.

1. The investigation of the origin of the Universe will go on.
2. What are the effects of pollution on the population of birds in large urban areas?
Several assumptions can be made.
3. You can clearly see the difference between these two sets of data.
4. The experiment will be over in three months.
5. We can't tell whether electricity is some peculiar kind of substance or motion of ordinary matter.
6. This approach does not promise many innovations.
7. Our new research assistant is a nice guy.
8. 7 out of 25 students had difficulty with the task.
9. Each statement in a high-level programming language is translated into many machine-code instructions generally.

1. Using Gender-neutral language

Increasingly, students are required to use gender-neutral language in their written work, whether it is a research report or coursework. It is best, therefore, to avoid the use of *he* and *she* wherever possible, unless of course it refers to specific individuals cited in your thesis/dissertation.

Examples

Instead of *Before a researcher embarks on fieldwork, he needs to ensure that he has adequate funding.*

Write: *Before a researcher embarks on fieldwork, they need to ensure that they have adequate funding.*

Or: *Before a researcher embarks on fieldwork, they need to ensure that they have adequate funding.*

Instead of *If a sociologist is to make generalizations, she needs to do so responsibly.*

Write: *If sociologists are to make generalizations, they need to do so responsibly.*

Or: *If a sociologist is to make generalizations, he or she needs to do so responsibly.*

(Note: 'he' or 'she' is sometimes written as 'he/she' or 's/he'; however, we would caution against overuse of this convention.) or *Sociologists whomake generalizations need to do so responsibly.*

- A further way of using Gender-neutral language is by introducing the sentence with the impersonal 'it' leading to expressions such as 'it is felt that...' or 'it is thought that...'. Consider the following examples:

It is felt that the police are doing valuable work.

It was thought that the government had shown little regard for public opinion.

The alternative would have been:

People feel that the police are doing valuable work. Which

people? Are they important?

Everyone thought that the government had shown little regard for public opinion.

Who is 'everyone' exactly? Is this word needed for the meaning of the sentence to be clear?

2. Cautious Writing

An important feature of English academic written discourse is a cautious manner

of writing. That is the avoidance of too definite statements or conclusions. The purpose of

such a strategy is to be accurate and to protect the author from being criticized for possible errors or invalid claims. sweeping statements which do not consider exceptions are not accepted in an academic text. Hence, Cautious writing also allows for other opinions or points of view. The main linguistic ways of doing this are as follows.

i. By using modal verbs.

Continuum thermodynamics of solids, fluids, and mixtures forms a powerful tool for many unsolved problems.

Continuum thermodynamics of solids, fluids, and mixtures **may** form a powerful tool for many unsolved problems.

Continuum thermodynamics of solids, fluids, and mixtures **could** form a powerful tool for many unsolved problems.

ii. By using adjectives that express probability (in all examples below the statements gradually weaken in strength).

Dinosaurs died out due to sudden climatic changes.

It is certain/It is likely/It is probable/It is possible/It is unlikely that dinosaurs died out due to sudden climatic changes.

iii. By using a there is construction with the word possibility.

There is a strong possibility/a definite possibility/a slight possibility that dinosaurs died out due to sudden climatic changes.

iv. By using adverbs that express certainty and probability.

Definitely/Undoubtedly/Probably/Possibly/Presumably dinosaurs died out due to sudden climatic changes.

v. By using verb phrases that distance the writer from the statements or conclusions she/he makes.

Social scientists often serve contradictory political and scientific values. *It seems*
It appears/It would seem/appear that social scientists often serve contradictory
political and scientific values.

Social scientists *seem to* often serve contradictory political and scientific values.

Social scientists *appear to* often serve contradictory political and scientific values. Social
scientists *tend to* often serve contradictory political and scientific values

vi. By using quantity words.

A majority of social scientists often serve contradictory political and scientific values.

A large number of social scientists often serve contradictory political and scientific values.

Social scientists *of many countries* often serve contradictory political and scientific values.

Some social scientists often serve contradictory political and scientific values.

A few social scientists often serve contradictory political and scientific values.

vii. By using statements of shared knowledge, assumptions, and beliefs.

It is generally agreed

It is widely accepted



that dinosaurs died out due to sudden climatic

changes.

It is now generally recognized