



STUDENT NOTES FOR SUCCESS

No 8

Qualities of good academic writing

Academic writing is in a class of its own. Some students may struggle to write well at first, but here are a few guidelines to help you to produce better academic texts.

'Good' academic writing includes the following essential elements:

- use of formal language
- objective style
- precise and concise language
- accuracy (particularly in grammar, punctuation and syntax)
- correct referencing style, and
- flow and cohesion.

Use of formal language

Academic writing uses a formal style in order to aid clarity. Contracted forms, such as *"they're"* and *"it's"* have no place in academic writing, unless you are reporting an interview. Casual (spoken) expressions, such as *"pretty important," "a lot of," "get by," "sort of"* and *"they say"* must also be avoided. Formality is aided by using the language of the particular discipline (area of study) in which you are writing. In other words, there are certain terms and phrases that are used exclusively in Built Environment, Media, Design and Art and so on. These terms are understood by those in the field and have special meanings in that field.

Objective style

We generally avoid personal expressions in academic writing. Instead of phrases such as *"I think," "I believe," "we used," "we asked,"* you would use phrases such as:

It is considered important to...

It is possible that....

This paper presents the findings of....

In academic writing you should also avoid using absolutes or generalisations.

$$\begin{matrix} a+b \\ =c \end{matrix}$$

Example:

Instead of *"It is impossible to determine..."* you might use *"It is difficult to determine..."*.

Precise and concise language

Academic writing in English uses a fairly direct style, particularly in comparison to some other languages. Some students use a style that is too indirect for English. If you are having problems you can usually simplify your writing by being more precise and using fewer words, rather than more. There are also special terms that can be used which are simpler and often clearer.

$$\begin{matrix} a+b \\ =c \end{matrix}$$

Examples:

"The people who filled out the survey" can simply be written as *"The respondents"*.

"I would say, although I can't be sure..." could be *"It would seem that ..."*

Students sometimes think that jargon sounds impressive; actually it often makes writing obscure and difficult to understand.

$$\begin{matrix} a+b \\ =c \end{matrix}$$

Example:

"Workers will make context-sensitive judgments that enable them to continuously develop and transform their practice and themselves"



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Can be more clearly expressed as “Workers will learn from experience!” (Watson 2003, 163)

Accuracy (grammar, punctuation and syntax)

One of the most common errors in student writing is the use of sentence fragments, that is, ‘sentences’ which are not complete sentences.



Example of a sentence fragment:

“Because the company has made this decision.”



Examples of the use of punctuation to help clarify meaning:

Here, the meaning is not very clear due to the omission of commas:

There are some team issues particularly division of tasks which need addressing.

Commas help to make meaning clear:

There are some team issues, particularly division of tasks, which need addressing.

The sentence below is clumsy and unclear:

It is evident from the survey responses that team members are unhappy and it appears that the company has not really addressed this issue and more needs to be done.

A better way to write it is:

It is evident from the survey responses that team members are unhappy. It appears that the company has not really addressed this issue, and more needs to be done.

Correct referencing style

Chicago 17 is used at the FB&L (note Law uses AGLC) but a range of styles is used in academic writing world-wide. The Library website at <http://libguides.library.curtin.edu.au/referencing/chicago> provides you with a very detailed selection of examples of Chicago 17 referencing. Apart from the technical aspects of referencing, it is important to be able to incorporate the ideas of others into your writing without breaking the flow. Most importantly, the reader should be able to clearly distinguish your ideas from those you are quoting.



Examples of good referencing:

One of the definitions used by Katzenbach (1993, 16) states that “ ...

Li (2009) suggests that teams work better when..

According to Lau (2003, 48) “communication is most important in the smooth functioning of teams”. This would seem to support Kennet’s (2003) belief that good communication is an absolutely vital ingredient in successful teams.

Flow and cohesion

Good academic writing has a tight structure and parts seem to flow naturally from one to the other. The following will help to achieve cohesion:

- Repetition of key nouns and pronouns in paragraphs:
English, an international language, is now spoken in many parts of the world. English is considered, in many ways, the language of business.
- Using “connectors” between sentences and between paragraphs:
*The price of petrol is currently a major concern. **In spite of this**, it seems improbable that [...] **Moreover**, this strategy is likely to...*
- Using phrases that refer to other parts of the text:
As was indicated above...
As the next section will show....
This will be further explored in the next section.

Finally, of course, there is a need to edit several times in order to achieve smooth and cohesive academic writing.

Watson, D. 2003. *Death Sentence*. Random House: Milsons Point.

Find out more at the CBS Academic Communication Development website:
<https://businesslaw.curtin.edu.au/study/student-experience/academic-communication-development/>

You might also be interested in *Handy Handout 2. Proofreading and Editing*.

Contact us at:
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