

How can I write in a more academic style?

The skills explored in this pack help you to develop your communication by considering what is appropriate for an academic audience and learning how to communicate effectively in writing that is suitable for an academic context.

This guide will explore some key characteristics of a generic academic style and offer some examples of both good and bad academic style. You will note that none of these examples suggest that you need to use long words or obscure terms, or write in complex sentences. Have a look at these two paragraphs.

This is a paragraph written in an informal style that is NOT academic:

So, what I really think is that rap music doesn't have anything at all to do with violence. I don't agree with Blakeney that because people in gangs listen to rap, that's why they kill people. People are going to kill each other anyway, no matter what they listen to. Even though it's terrible that loads of people are killed through gang violence, you shouldn't take that to mean rap music encourages violence. Sure, it talks about it, but nobody is going to copy what they hear in a song – it would be really stupid.

Compare it to this paragraph, which is much more formal and academic:

The association typically drawn between rap music and gang violence lacks foundation. While gang violence is common in inner cities, accounting for nearly 30% of violent crime (RCPS, 2014), no causal link can be drawn between this and rap music (Noakes, 2010 p.5). The cultural association between gangs and rap has led many observers (e.g. Blakeney, 2009) to conclude, in error, that rap causes or encourages violent crime. Research has yet to establish such a connection.

Key differences you probably noticed are that the first paragraph uses 'I' and 'you', uses contractions like 'doesn't', includes emotional language like 'terrible', phrases like 'I agree' and 'I think' and uses strong language like 'anything at all'. The second paragraph emphasises research and evidence over personal opinion. Both make the same core argument - that rap music is not linked to gang violence - but the second makes it more convincingly. These are some of the key differences between informal writing and a formal, academic style, which you can remember with the acronym TOPIC:

- The full word, not contractions
- Objective, not subjective
- Precise, not vague
- Impersonal, not personal
- Cautious, not strong

Let's have a look at what we mean by these and how you can improve your writing style.

The full word, not contractions

Contractions are words where some letters are left out when two words are brought together, like 'don't', which combines 'do' and 'not' into one word. These are often considered informal, and should be avoided in academic style.

Common contractions to avoid:

- Don't = do not
- Won't = will not
- Isn't = is not
- He'll = he will
- It's = it is

Objective, not subjective

Academic writing should aim to be objective, or neutral, as opposed to subjective, which means writing from a particular point of view. Typical subjective phrases would be: 'I feel', 'I think', 'I believe'. Subjective writing can also include emotional words, intended to make your reader feel something. The reason for avoiding subjective language is so that your arguments and evidence can be debated.

Subjective: I like this character.

The sentence above can't be debated because it is a matter of opinion; you can say that you disliked the character and why, but you can't necessarily change my views. Academic style usually tries to make an argument which can be debated, and uses facts and evidence, rather than emotion, to support it.

Objective: This character is central to the plot.

This statement can be disputed; you can point out issues with plot and the character, and support your view with examples and evidence.

In particular types of assignment you may be asked for your personal reactions and responses to a reading or an experience – in this case, ignore this guideline, and be as emotional as you like! But refer to your assignment brief first.

Precise, not vague

Academic writing is usually very precise about numbers, places and cases. This is because it makes the conclusions more reliable. Generalisations without detail are not very convincing to the reader. For example, which of these statements would you tend to believe?

Vague: There are loads of issues with the product.

Precise: The product has caused allergic reactions in nearly 10% of consumers, and has low satisfaction rates.

Note that the precise version identifies what the issues are and gives specific information about them.

Avoid phrases like 'loads', 'lots' and so on. Also, try to avoid using words based on 'thing' – something, anything, etc. The word 'thing' is always vague and should be replaced by a more specific word.

Impersonal, not personal

Personal language uses the first person 'I' or 'we' and the second person 'you'. The problem with writing this way in an academic context is that using 'we' or 'you' makes assumptions about what your reader thinks which may not be accurate.

You can avoid using 'I' by using the passive voice. Normally we would say, for instance, 'I kicked the ball'. In the passive, we would say 'the ball was kicked'. So 'I' is taken out of the sentence and the order of the sentence is reversed (see guide re third person for more detail).

Avoid using 'you' and 'we' by identifying specifically which group of people you are referring to. Is it researchers in the field? Is it professional nurses, teachers, etc.?

Writing impersonally can feel inauthentic, as though you are not able to put your own thoughts and ideas into what you are writing. But good academic style puts facts and information first and foremost and personal responses into the background. You are still present in what you write because you are choosing the information, organising it, paraphrasing it, and interpreting it for the reader. So, you can still write honestly and authentically without writing 'I believe...'.

There are, of course, exceptions to this guideline. For some assignments, such as reflective writing, you are expected and encouraged to write in a more personal style. Check your assignment brief and see whether this is the case for each individual assignment and course. Also, in some subjects the first person is more acceptable than others. Look at the books and journal articles you are reading: how much do they use 'I'? This offers you a rough guide for how acceptable it is in your subject, but again, refer to your assignment brief to check. Even in subjects which might generally be more lenient about use of the first person, particular assignments and modules may specify otherwise. For more detail, see ['Writing in the 3rd Person'](#) Guide.

Cautious, not strong

Strong language means making claims which are difficult to support, for example:

Strong: Chocolate definitely causes cancer.

In an academic context, if you wrote the sentence above, you would have to show that chocolate leads directly to cancer and that there are no other causes. That is very difficult to do. So academic writing tends to be more cautious, using phrases like 'could be considered to' rather than 'is', 'may be', 'is often', and so on.

Cautious: Chocolate has been tentatively linked to cancer.

You still have to support your claim as much as possible, but the cautious language allows you to avoid exaggeration and acknowledge that there may be gaps in your research.

But watch out: don't over-use cautious language, or you will sound like you have no faith in your conclusions.

Too cautious: 'Chocolate has tentatively been somewhat linked, in a few cases, to a potential increase in rates of cancer'

Avoid:

- Always, everything, everyone
- totally, absolutely, definitely, obviously
- Huge, colossal, extreme

Useful phrases:

- May, might, could
- Indicate, suggest,
- Typically, generally, widely
- Major, significant, important
- Probably, likely, potentially,

To recap, academic style should use TOPIC:

- The full word, not contractions
- Objective terms
- Precise phrasing
- Impersonal language and
- Cautious phrasing.

Next steps:

- Analyse a book chapter and a journal article in your subject area. Which of these features do you notice? Are there exceptions to the rules? How common do you think these exceptions may be?
- Review a previous assignment and see if you can improve on your academic style.

Further reading:

Bailey, S.(2015) *Academic writing: a handbook for international students*. 4th edition. Abingdon: Routledge.

Gillet, A. (2009) *Successful academic writing*. Harlow: Pearson Longman.

McCarthy, M. (2008) *Academic vocabulary in use*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.