

## Writing in an Academic Tone

One of the most important skills that you can learn through writing in college is how to write in a formal, sophisticated, yet concise style. This type of writing will be of use to you no matter your academic and career goals. It is, however, also one of the most difficult writing skills to master. Here are some pointers to help you in this effort.

**Informal Language** is characterized by expressions that are often taken from spoken English. Often, this type of language is appropriate for informal journal writing, reflections, personal letters and creative works. It is also usually acceptable to write from the first-person perspective (using “I”) in this type of writing.

**Formal Language** is the language most commonly used in academic papers like essays, research papers and reports. It is sometimes recommended that you omit the use of “I” in this type of writing and instead write from the third-person perspective, which is much more objective.

Note: Certain teachers may want assignments written in a specific style. For examples, a teacher may want a journal entry written in a more formal style. If you are unsure, ask.

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### Other Types of Language to Avoid in Academic Writing:

**Sexist Language-** One of the most common ways that people unintentionally use sexist writing is with pronouns. There are several ways to avoid using “he”, “him”, and “his” when referring to nouns meant to include both sexes.

#### 1. Use the plural form for both nouns and pronouns:

*Original:* In order to do well in a class, a **student** needs to do **his** homework.

*Revised:* In order to do well in a class, **students** need to do **their** homework.

#### 2. Omit the pronoun:

*Original:* Every leader should develop **his** communication skills.

*Revised:* Every leader should develop communication skills.

#### 3. Occasionally use *his or her, he/she, or s/he* when you need to stress the action of an individual. Such references won't be awkward unless they occur frequently.

*Original:* If you must use a technical term **he** may not understand, explain it.

*Revised:* If you must use a technical term **he or she** may not understand, explain it.

**Clichés** are figurative expressions that are overused and have lost their meaning. Avoid using these in academic writing. Often, the meanings of clichés are not precise and therefore can create confusion for the reader.

*Examples of clichés:* - **busy as a beaver**  
- **beat around the bush**  
- **in a nutshell**  
- **crack of dawn**  
- **adding insult to injury**  
- **better late than never**

**Colloquialisms** are expressions used in conversational language. However, this type of language is not commonly accepted in academic writing because it contributes to a more informal tone.

*Colloquialisms can be:*

**Contractions:** Avoid using words such as **can't, won't** or other contractions in academic writing. Instead, use **cannot** or **will not**.

**Fillers:** Avoid using filler words such as **like, well, or anyway**.

**Informal terms:** Avoid using: **folks, kids, guy, OK, pretty good, hassle, kind of**

**Slang** is made up of vocabulary that is formed and used by a group of people who share common experiences and common interests. Avoid using slang in written work because it may mislead or cause confusion for the reader.

*Examples:* **gross, freaked out, flipped out, bummed, dissed**

**Jargon** Within every discipline of study, there is a vocabulary that is unique to it. This vocabulary includes certain terms that persons within the field regularly use and understand in their writing and communication. It is important, however, to keep the audience you are writing for in mind. If you are writing for a general audience, made up of people not necessarily involved with the specific discipline you are writing about, you should avoid jargon and technical terms. If you absolutely must use a technical term, define it within your paper.

*Examples:* **subcutaneous hemorrhage, beta decay, psychoanalytic theory**

**General vs. Specific wording-** Use **concrete** and **specific** words as much as possible and avoid **abstract** and **general** words.

**Abstract** words refer to qualities, ideas, and actions that we cannot experience through our senses, such as *culture, friendship, loyalty, and democracy*. **Concrete** words refer to things we can experience through our senses, such as *orange, blood, scream, laugh, hug, tick, swamp*.

**General** words refer to large groups of people or things. For example, the word *athlete* refers to everyone who plays a sport. To make this idea more **specific**, *athlete* can be narrowed down to *professional athlete, professional tennis player, professional female tennis player, top ten female tennis players*, and finally to *Steffi Graf, one of the top ten female tennis players*. Using concrete and specific words will make your paper more precise.

An example of a **general sentence**:

"After major trials, jurors are often interviewed for their opinions."

This sentence can be made more **specific** by changing the general terms to more specific ones:

"After major trials, jurors are often interviewed by *newspaper and television reporters who seek to find out the jurors' versions of the deliberations*."

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Sources used in designing this handout:

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