

Academic style

Writing and speaking academically

What is 'academic style'?

The English used in academic tasks, particularly in written ones, is a little different from our everyday spoken language. In this flyer we will call this a difference in **style**.

The University expects you to express your findings and arguments in 'academic style'. Every student can become more confident in using it – and better at it.

'Academic style' not only 'looks good' – it can enable you to think *more logically, more clearly* and *more realistically* as you work on an assignment.

Consider these examples:

<i>Everyday spoken English</i>	<i>Academic English</i>
<p>Informal:</p> <p><i>"This sheet gives you just a rough idea."</i></p> <p><i>"A lot of students want to make appointments at the LLSU, so to be fair all round there's a limit to how many times we see a student each semester."</i></p> <p>Subjective focus:</p> <p><i>"People don't really know what happens or why."</i></p> <p><i>"If you don't have your card with you, you won't be able to take any books out."</i></p>	<p>Formal:</p> <p><i>"Information contained in this document serves as a guide only."</i></p> <p><i>"Due to the high demand on our services, LLSU needs to monitor the number of individual tutorials students have each semester."</i></p> <p>Objective focus:</p> <p><i>"The process is insufficiently understood."</i></p> <p><i>"All users must have a current library card with them when borrowing."</i></p>



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<i>Everyday spoken English</i>	<i>Academic English</i>
<p>Strong, unqualified statements are often made:</p> <p><i>"All this strange weather is definitely caused by global warming."</i></p> <p><i>"What English teachers should be doing is getting their students to do research and write academic-type essays."</i></p> <p>Words used imprecisely:</p> <p><i>"We sent about a thousand questionnaires out."</i></p> <p>Active (rather than passive) voice:</p> <p><i>"We tried to think about a few reasons why it could have happened."</i></p>	<p>Cautious but inclusive statements are used:</p> <p><i>"Certain abnormal weather conditions may be shown with reasonable certainty to be products of global warming."</i></p> <p><i>"Arguably, the key priority for an English language program should be to devise and implement authentic academic writing tasks."</i></p> <p>Words used precisely:</p> <p><i>"The questionnaire was mailed to each one of the 984 participants."</i></p> <p>Relatively frequent use of passive voice:</p> <p><i>"Some possible explanations of the outcome were considered."</i></p>

Other important points to remember:

1. Avoid over-generalisation.

'Academic style' can help you to be more careful and realistic when you make generalisations. This is a thinking skill as well as a language skill. Thinking and writing, however, are quite closely related and can positively reinforce each other.

For example: instead of *"International students are always quiet in tutorials"*, which is an over-generalisation (*all* international students? in *all* tutorials? *all* the time?), you could suggest: *"Many (though not all) international students tend to be among the quieter participants in tutorials."* This is a qualified generalization – which you would need to go on to support with relevant evidence.

2. Refer to the work of others.

You never think - or write - in isolation. Other writers will have dealt with topics, issues and methods that are similar to those you are working with. In many cases their work will provide the actual starting point of your assignment.

To acknowledge the work of others you need to know how to summarise, and how to use 'citation' (also known as 'referencing').

Consider this example:

'Previous research into the impact of task variability in oral language has suggested that relatively small variations in task design can influence the linguistic output of learners (Foster 1996, Foster and Skehan 1996, Skehan and Foster 1997, Mehnert 1998, Ortega 1999).'

(O'Loughlin and Wigglesworth 2003: 90).

Here, the two authors of this sentence (O'Loughlin and Wigglesworth – see 'Works cited' on p. 4 of this flyer) have:

- (i) summarised a key finding from five previous studies;
- (ii) presented it cautiously, inclusively, and with an objective focus, as modelled on pp. 1-2 above, i.e.: "Previous research....has suggested that...";
- (iii) used an academic citation system – in this case, an in-text style (APA, Harvard or MLA) rather than a footnote style (Cambridge, Chicago) or a numeric one (Vancouver).

To produce successful academic writing, you will need to become skilled at making all these three 'moves' – (i), (ii) and (iii). This will raise the worth of your essay in the eyes of your marker. In addition – and this is a very important point that most students are understandably concerned about – it will mean that you have obviously not engaged in 'plagiarism'.

How to reference correctly and avoid plagiarism is a very important subject, to which we have devoted a separate flyer in this series: **'Plagiarism – and how to avoid it'**.

Copies are available from the LLSU (723 Swanston Street) or by visiting

www.services.unimelb.edu.au/lisu/resources/referencing.html

LLSU also has available a comprehensive booklet, **'Avoiding Plagiarism'** (cost: \$2.50, GST-inclusive), which covers the subject in detail and shows you how to use the principal referencing systems required by the University's different Departments and Faculties.

3. Limit your claims – be realistic.

When you finish an assignment, especially if it has involved time-consuming research, you may feel personally attached to it and may overlook its limitations or weaknesses. This can be a particular temptation for postgraduate student writers.

Be 'academically modest'! Your work is only a small part of a much bigger enterprise in which many people are engaged. Don't make large claims for its importance unless you really have evidence to support those claims. Other people may be working in a similar area and making similar (or even greater) progress. Look at how one student's early claim needed to be revised:

Original	Revision
In conclusion, this study is a useful first step in the development of biodegradation techniques.	In conclusion, it is hoped that this study may be a useful contribution to the development of biodegradation techniques.

(Source: University of Birmingham English for International Students Unit, n.d.)

In conclusion:

'Academic style' is not only a matter of particular words or particular grammatical features. It involves how you think, how you reason, and how you interact with what has already been discovered or argued. It is central to your studies. Aim to deepen your understanding of what it is, how it works – and how you can apply it.

Works cited:

O'Loughlin, K. and G. Wigglesworth (2003), Task Design in IELTS Academic Writing Task 1: The Effect of Quantity and Manner of Presentation of Information on Candidate Writing. In R. Tulloh (ed.) *IELTS Research Reports: 2003, Volume 4* Canberra: IELTS Australia.

University of Birmingham English for International Students Unit, Kibbitzers: Academic Modesty, available at www.eisu.bham.ac.uk/Webmaterials/Kibbitzers/Kibbitzer32.htm (accessed on 14/02/05)

Additional resources:

<http://airport.unimelb.edu.au> (Academic Interactive Resources Portal – online academic skills development resources, including material on academic writing).

<http://owl.english.purdue.edu> (Purdue University's Online Writing Lab: a major site from the United States).

www.eisu.bham.ac.uk/Webmaterials/Kibbitzers/ (contains many 'cases' of vocabulary and grammatical issues faced by academic writers whose first language is not English).

www.services.unimelb.edu.au/llsu/resources/writing.html (a range of flyers from the LLSU – similar to the present one – along with some useful links).