

1.20 Academic writing style

The most important thing is to keep your writing clear and concise and make sure that you get your ideas over in a comprehensible form. It's clear expression of these ideas that will impress your tutor, not a string of long, inappropriate words found in your dictionary.

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The most important thing to remember is generally to try to avoid everyday, informal language, especially colloquial expressions and slang.

In your writing structure is very important: sentences should be complete and ideas arranged into paragraphs or sections, and you should aim for perfection in your grammar and spelling.

You need to clearly show your understanding of the subject and your ability to use information to answer a specific question or complete a specific task.

Avoid some aspects of informal English

- Don't (do not!) use contractions (eg it's, he'll, it'd etc): always use the full form (it is/has, he will, it would/had). (unless you are quoting someone)
- Don't use colloquial language or slang (eg kid, a lot of/lots of, cool)
- Always write as concisely as you can, with no irrelevant material or "waffle".
- Generally avoid "phrasal verbs" (e.g. get off, get away with, put in etc): instead, use one word equivalents.
- Avoid common but vague words and phrases such as get, nice, thing. Your writing needs to be more precise.
- Avoid overuse of brackets; don't use exclamation marks or dashes; avoid direct questions; don't use "etc".
- Always use capital letters appropriately and never use the type of language used in texting!

See the practice exercises at the end of the guide.

Structure your work carefully

- Make sure you write in complete sentences (see Guide 1.34).
- Divide your writing up into paragraphs (see Guide 1.35).
- Use connecting words and phrases to make your writing explicit and easy to follow (see Guide 1.39).
- Check your grammar and spelling carefully (see Guide 1.42).

Make your writing formal and impersonal

- Avoid personal language (I, my, we etc). unless your guidelines allow it or require it (for example, writing a reflective piece about your experience).
- Never use emotive language; be objective rather than subjective.(See Guide 1.22).
- Be careful with your statements - for example, "everybody shops online" - no, they don't. You must be specific and provide evidence to support your writing. Be cautious unless you can, for example, prove it is always true, or true for everyone you are talking about.
- You should consistently use evidence from your source reading to back up what you are saying and reference this correctly.
- Avoid sexist language. Don't refer to "the doctor" as he; instead, make the subject plural and refer to them as they. Avoid he/she, herself/himself etc. unless you are referring to a specific individual.

Remember that your main aim is clarity. Check your vocabulary and sentences carefully.

Hedging/being cautious

You should:

- Use verbs, when necessary, such as would, could, may, might which 'soften' what you're saying. (If you use verbs such as will then you are saying you know exactly what will happen and that this is always true.)
- Use qualifying adverbs such as some, several, a minority of, a few, many to avoid making overgeneralisations. Provide evidence to support the statement.
- Use phrases such as It is believed that ... It is thought that ... It is a widely held view that ...It has been reported that ... It has commonly been assumed that ... You must then provide the evidence to explain how/why that view, for example, is held and why this is important, or 'right'/'wrong' in regards to your assignment question.

Exercises (answers at the bottom of this guide)

Exercise 1

Replace the phrasal verbs in the sentences with a more appropriate verb from the list below. Don't forget to keep the same tense.

fluctuate	investigate	eliminate	raise	reduce	propose	intervene	establish
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1. Researchers have been **looking into** the problem for 15 years.
2. This issue was **brought up** during the seminar.
3. It is assumed that the management knows what is happening and will therefore **step in** if there is a problem.
4. Schools cannot altogether **get rid** of the problem of truancy.
5. The number of staff has been **cut down** recently.
6. It was very difficult to **find out** exactly what happened.
7. House prices have a tendency to **go up and down**.
8. A potential solution was **put forward** two years ago.

Exercise 2

Replace the following phrasal verbs with a more formal single word.

1. The locals could not **put up with** the visitors from the city.
2. The decline was **brought about** by cheap imports.
3. The university is **thinking about** installing CCTV.
4. Sales are likely to **drop off** in the third quarter.
5. He **went on** speaking for over an hour.
6. The meeting was **put off** until December.
7. The cinema was **pulled down** ten years ago.
8. People have **cut down** on their consumption of beef.

Exercise 3

Which of the two alternatives in bold do you think is more appropriate in academic writing?

1. The government has made **considerable/great** progress in solving the problem.
2. We **got/obtained** excellent results in the experiment.
3. The results of **lots of/numerous** tests have been pretty good/encouraging.

4. A loss of jobs is one of the **consequences/things that will happen** if the process is automated.
5. The relationship between the management and workers is **extremely/really** important.
6. Some suggestions **springing up from/arising** from the study will be presented.

Exercise 4

Use a more formal word or phrase to replace those in bold.

1. The reaction of the officials was **sort of** negative.
2. The economic outlook is **nice**.
3. Car manufacturers are planning a **get together** to discuss their strategy.
4. The resulting competition between countries is **good**.
5. The economy is affected by **things** that happen outside the country.
6. She was **given the sack** because of her poor record.
7. The examination results were **super**.

Exercise 5

Replace the contractions in the following sentences with full forms where necessary.

1. The results weren't very encouraging.
2. We'll have to conduct another experiment.
3. She's been all around the world.
4. It's the best solution to the problem.
5. Our questionnaire shows that teachers aren't paid what they're worth.
6. His response was, "A job's a job; if it doesn't pay enough, it's a lousy job'.
7. He'd rather announce the findings at the conference.
8. The department's approach didn't succeed.

Exercise 6

Suggest improvements to the following sentences to avoid use of "you" and "we".

1. **You can apply the same theory of learning** to small children.
2. **You can only do this** after the initial preparation has been conducted.
3. The figures are accurate to within 1%, but **you should note that** local variations may apply.
4. **In the second section of the report, we will** consider the environmental consequences.

Exercise 7

Suggest alternatives to the following to avoid use of personal language.

1. **In this essay I will discuss** the main differences between the English and Scottish legal systems.
2. **I have divided my report into five sections.**
3. **I will conclude** by proposing that all drugs should be legalized.
4. **The opinion of the present author in this essay is that** the importance of the monarchy should be reduced.
5. **In the third part of the essay, we will look** at the reasons for public hysteria over the SARS virus.
6. **Although I am not an expert in the field, I have tried very hard to understand the main ideas.**

Exercise 8

Make these statements more cautious.

1. Today, everyone uses credit cards for all their shopping.
2. Drinking wine is bad for you.
3. Global warming will have disastrous consequences for the whole world.
4. Teleworking leads to isolation.
5. Women are worse drivers than men.

Exercise 9

Rewrite the following in a more formal style.

1. The positive feedback **made up for** the problems **we came across** during the trials.
2. **You can clearly see the differences between these two learning processes.**
3. The subjects **didn't have much difficulty** with the task.
4. We found **example after example** of autonomous systems in lots of countries.

Answers

Exercise 1

1. **investigating**
2. **raised**
3. **intervene**
4. **eliminate**
5. **reduced**
6. **establish**
7. **fluctuate**
8. **proposed**

Exercise 2

1. **tolerate**
2. **caused**
3. **considering**
4. **decline / fall**
5. **continued**
6. **postponed**
7. **demolished**
8. **reduced**

If you have different answers - check their meaning carefully to see if they are a suitable replacement.

Exercise 3

1. **considerable**
2. **obtained**
3. **numerous / encouraging**
4. **consequences**
5. **extremely**
6. **arising from**

Exercise 4

1. You could use an adverb like **somewhat**. A better approach would be to explain exactly what the reaction was.
2. **positive / encouraging**
3. **meeting / conference** - check you use the correct word for the situation
4. **positive / encouraging** - remember to explain why
5. **factors**
6. **dismissed**

7. **excellent** - it is better to explain - you could provide the data for the results and/or identify the improvement

Exercise 5

1. **were not**
2. **We will**
3. **She has**
4. **It is**
5. **are not / they are**
6. No changes - this is a quotation
7. **He would**
8. **did not**

Exercise 6

1. **The same theory of learning can be applied**
2. **This can only be done**
3. **it should be noted that**
4. **The second section of the report will**

Exercise 7

1. **This essay will discuss**
2. **The report has been divided into five sections OR There are five sections in this report**
3. **The essay will conclude**
4. **The importance of the monarchy should be reduced because...** (explain, with evidence)
5. **The third part of the essay will examine / discuss / analyse...** (choose the correct word to describe the content)
6. Remove this, just provide the evidence and your analysis

Exercise 8

There are many different ways to correct these sentences

1. Be specific, find evidence to identify how many people actually use them. Also, be specific about where/who - which city/country/continent or age/profession/etc.?
2. How much wine? Evidence needed. What harm does it cause? Evidence needed.
3. Avoid will unless you can prove that it is correct. Provide evidence and be careful/cautious with the language you use.
4. You can add can - can lead - but it is much better to provide evidence and explain why.

5. Provide evidence. Explain. Be specific. How is this measured? Accidents? Practical skills? Which women/men? Which age group/location/etc.? For example, young male drivers in the UK can be charged much more for car insurance because they are more likely to have accidents.

Exercise 9

1. **compensated for / experienced**
2. **The differences between these two learning processes can be clearly seen.**
3. **had little difficulty**
4. **numerous examples**