

General Introduction to Academic Writing

Structure, grammar, effective argumentation, and the use of informative critical content are all significant features in academic writing. However, a key factor of academic writing is the way your ideas are phrased and presented (i.e. the style).

In other words, how you say something is as important as what you say.

Incorporating academic phrasing can be one of the trickiest aspects of writing. Many students think they should adopt an overly sophisticated vocabulary in order to write in an academic tone. This is not necessarily the case. Instead, you can use the vocabulary you already have in a formal and structured manner. Remember, academic writing is about clarity, not pompous phrasing!

Formal vs. Informal Expression

Students are advised to avoid colloquial and idiomatic language. When providing a literature review, for example, it would not be effective to argue that:

Smith was obviously not bothered to consider X and Y and so his analysis isn't very good.

This type of phrasing comes across as a biased opinion instead of a knowledgeable insight. The language also uses contractions like “isn’t” instead of full words like “is not”. Instead, consider the following:

Smith neglects to consider X and Y in his study, rendering his analysis insufficient in its scope.

Likewise, the use of informal expression can diminish an otherwise valuable argument. Notice the difference in effect on the tone in the following:

Therefore, it isn't a good idea to go with the advice given by him.

vs.

Therefore, it is not advisable to follow the recommendations offered by the analyst.

The latter is more authoritative and convincing. Avoiding the use of contractions and idiomatic expression will only benefit the effectiveness of your writing.

Active Language

Using active language instils a degree of authority into your work, whereas the passive voice renders your argument as speculation or conjecture and not analytical. Although there are instances where speculation is required, an active tone presents your critical insight as critical analysis and not speculative opinion.

- **Example of the passive voice:** It could be argued that the data set is perhaps beneficial as support for the conclusion presented by the analyst.
- **A more active version:** The data set is beneficial in its supporting role for the analyst's final conclusion.

The former version raises too many questions, e.g. if “it can be argued”, then why is the writer not making that argument? The latter can also be used as a means of supporting a critical analysis: **The data set does not effectively support the conclusions put forward by the analyst.**

When presenting a critical analysis, which most academic assignments intend to do, it is more effective to make an argument than allude to its possibility. The active voice also makes your writing more precise, which ensures your reader will comprehend your logic and rhetoric more fully.

- **A passive statement:** Dante's *Inferno* could be read as a parody of the society he lived in but also could perhaps be an insight into contemporary Florentine practices of the Catholic Church.
- **A less “wordy” version:** Dante's *Inferno* both parodies Italian society of the era and provides insight into the corruption inherent in Florentine practices of the Catholic Church.

However, the passive voice can be useful if there is an aspect of your topic that cannot be verified. For example, if evidence is not available to make a conclusive claim but there is significant evidence on which a claim can be put forth:

It would appear that Kafka had insider knowledge of the working of top secret judicial process which is alluded to in *The Trial*.

Likewise, if there is a statement that will be argued against, putting it in the passive form will work toward convincing the reader of the validity of your critical analysis.

Reduction of the “I” Voice

The overuse or misuse of the “I” voice can undermine the objectivity of your tone, and its use tends to hinder an argument by rendering the statements passive or biased opinion. Consider the examples below:

I believe that this passage is the most important for understanding Dickens's *Great Expectation* because it is the most interesting for me.

vs.

This passage is important for understanding Dickens's *Great Expectation* as it provides insight into British Empiricism.

The former phrasing does not provide any insight as to why the passage is significant; it only provides an example of what the author finds personally appealing. By avoiding the “I” voice, the latter phrasing simply states the point and it also provides more information. In the table below, you will see ways you can avoid using “I” in your writing:

Personal “I” Voice	Objective Voice
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ In my opinion, youths are being radicalised by social media.▪ I believe/ think that youths are being radicalised by social media.▪ The author believes youths are being radicalised by social media.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Youths are being radicalised by social media.▪ Research suggests that youths are being radicalised by social media.▪ Evidence shows that youths are being radicalised by social media.

Tone: Critical Insight vs. Informal Opinion

An effective critical tone avoids using more subjective language. Personal systems of belief are not entirely effective as critical analysis. Consider the examples below:

Adorno believes the mechanical reproduction of art kills its spirit.

vs.

Adorno argues that the mechanical reproduction kills the creative spirit of art by reducing it to a mere commodity.

The latter version is a far more objective presentation of Adorno's valuable theory of art, and the point is better explained. Building a reserve of academic words and phrases is important for the academic writer. Terminology that indicates an argument (such as author X “claims”, “posits”, “argues”, and “contends”) is very effective. Likewise, phrasing that highlights classifications, conclusions, and transitions ensures a more academic tone along with improving the “flow” of the essay by signposting the progression of the argument.

Unbiased Language

Terminology comes in and out of fashion, even in academia. Be aware of the current usage of terminology when discussing social issues such as gender, nationality, or medically-established disorders or conditions. For instance, it may be better to refer to “humanity”, rather than “mankind”.

Also, eliminate the use of adjectives that propose an opinionated value judgement. Leave such judgements to your readers.

The beautifully-designed building is also a genius example of architecture that is functional as well as amazingly environmentally friendly.

vs.

The building is an example of architectural design that is both functional and environmentally efficient.

The latter example is more objective because it avoids unnecessary adjectives and adverbs. The use of academic phrasing takes continual refinement and practice; therefore, practice producing academic phrasing that is concise, precise, and objective.

UCD Writing Centre Resources

For further information on academic writing and more detailed tips for improving academic style, please see the following handouts at <https://www.ucd.ie/writingcentre/about/handoutsandvideos/>

- Academic vs. Non-Academic Style: Example
- Making Writing More Formal
- Active and Passive Voice
- Writing Transitions
- Achieving Impact in Writing
- Achieving Rhythm in Sentences
- Academic Style: Common Mistakes
- Grammar: Essential Definitions
- Sentence Structure
- Punctuation
- Commas
- Grammar Quiz 1