THE UNIVERSITY OF
WESTERN
AUSTRALIA
SEEK WISDOM

STUDY*Smarter*
Survival Guide

ACADEMIC WRITING STYLE: OBJECTIVITY

What is academic writing style?

Academic writing style refers to the rules and conventions for producing written work in academic contexts. Although variations exist across disciplines, we can identify some common features:

- **Formality**,
- **Objectivity**, and
- **Clarity**.

This Survival Guide focuses on the second feature, **objectivity**. Writing in an objective or impersonal way enables you to sound more convincing or persuasive to academic audiences. The remainder of this guide provides strategies to write objectively.

Avoid expressing personal judgement

Using phrases such as "I think" or "I believe" may give an impression of bias. This is particularly problematic if you are reporting research findings or relating observations in a formal report. Instead, use **neutral phrases** that refer to the evidence rather than your personal feelings, e.g.

As such, *I feel there is a need for government intervention.* → *These findings suggest the need for government intervention.*

TIP

For some assignments, it is appropriate to use first person pronouns (e.g. *I, my, we, our*). However, the conventions about if and when to use personal pronouns differ between disciplines. If in doubt, check with your tutor or unit coordinator.

Avoid emotive language

Emotive language appeals to a reader's emotions or values and can be persuasive in some situations. However, it impedes a reader's efforts to consider arguments or evidence on their own merits and is therefore unsuitable for academic writing.

To appear objective, omit **emotive adjectives** (e.g. *funny, fabulous, awesome, horrible, ridiculous*) and **superlative adjectives** (e.g. *the best, the worst, the most interesting*) from your writing, e.g.

*The idea that intelligent life exists on Venus or Mars is a **ridiculous conspiracy**.*

↓

*There is **no evidence** of intelligent life on Venus or Mars.*

TIP

Rather than relying on emotive language, you should provide **specific details** and **evidence** to illustrate a point, e.g.

*Homer Simpson's tenure as Sanitation Commissioner was **disastrous**. = During Homer Simpson's tenure as Sanitation Commissioner, his policies **depleted the town's budget** and **permanently damaged** the local environment.*
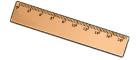

Use modal language

Modal language allows you to show different **levels of certainty** when making a claim or referring to another author's work.

This approach allows you to present your work – and the work of others – with **more accuracy**. It also leaves room for claims to be challenged in future research and to **reduce criticisms** of your work.

Use the following words and phrases to be more precise in your writing:

- Modal auxiliary verbs: *can, could, may, might, should, would.*
- Other modal verbs: *suggest (that), appear, look, seem, tend (to), incline (to), lean (towards).*
- Probability adjectives: *unlikely, plausible, probable, conceivable, feasible, certain.*
- Probability adverbs: *likely, presumably, possibly, probably, potentially, plausibly.*
- Frequency adverbs: *generally, usually, regularly, commonly, often, occasionally, rarely, seldom.*

*These results **prove** Xi (2008) **has** overstated the new drug's effectiveness.*

*These results **suggest** Xi (2008) **may have** overstated the new drug's effectiveness.*

Use appropriate evaluative words

Evaluative language expresses a positive or negative judgement about something.

Almost all writing requires you to express judgement, whether positive or negative. The trick is to use **appropriate language** as per the conventions of your discipline.

> **TIP**
>
> Avoid evaluative words which express non-technical judgements and feelings.

Appropriate evaluative language can make writing more specific and objective, e.g.,

*John Stuart Mill's arguments about free speech are **good**; his views regarding colonisation are **bad**.*

*John Stuart Mill's arguments about free speech **are compelling**, yet his views regarding colonisation are **problematic to many modern readers**.*

*Jones et al. (2018) found a **strong link** between the variables, but the **measly** sample rendered their study **useless**.*

*Jones et al. (2018) found a **significant relationship** between the variables, but the **small** sample **(n=12)** limits the **generalisability** of their study.*