

ACADEMIC WRITING STYLE: FORMALITY

What is academic writing style?

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

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

This Survival Guide focuses on the first feature, **formality**. Writing in a formal way helps your writing to sound more credible and authoritative. The remainder of this Guide provides strategies to write formally.



Write words in full

Write words out in full rather than contracting or abbreviating them. Both abbreviations and contractions are a sign of informality and casualness in writing.

Contractions: <i>I'm, we're, I've, we've, she's, aren't, didn't, can't, shouldn't.</i>	➔	Full words: <i>I am, we are, I have, we have, she is, are not, did not, cannot, should not.</i>
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Abbreviations: <i>e.g., i.e., etc., cf., viz., vs., &</i>	➔	Full words: <i>for example, that is, Et cetera, compare, namely, versus, and.</i>
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Avoid conversational markers

Conversational markers include linkers, intensifiers and run-ons. We use these words and phrases to link ideas, emphasise a point or maintain engagement with others **while we speak**.

Linkers: *OK, right, well, like, anyway, at any rate, to say the least*

Intensifiers: *just, simply, really + adjective*

Run-ons: *and so on, so on and so forth, et cetera (etc.)*

TIP

Conversational markers are unnecessary in written work, e.g. **At any rate**, *playing computer games has been found to be really beneficial* = *Playing computer games has been found to be beneficial*.

Avoid idiomatic expressions

An idiom is a word or phrase that has a **figurative meaning**. Idioms are culture-specific and may be misinterpreted by those who are unfamiliar with the culture.

Idiom:	Meaning:
An arm and a leg	<i>Very expensive or costly</i>
Back to the drawing board	<i>Having to start again when something fails</i>
A piece of cake	<i>Very easy</i>

TIP

In formal writing, replace idioms with language that is more literal and universal, e.g. *The project cost **an arm and a leg** = the project was **expensive***.

Avoid colloquial expressions and slang

Colloquial expressions are the words or phrases commonly used in conversations and informal contexts. Like slang, they are not suitable for academic writing.

Expression Meaning

<i>classy</i>	➡	<i>elegant in looks / behaviour</i>
<i>intro</i>	➡	<i>introduction</i>
<i>tough</i>	➡	<i>too strenuous / demanding</i>
<i>ace</i>	➡	<i>excellent</i>

TIP

Academic writing requires **more formal** vocabulary, e.g. *The research details the **pros** (benefits) of accelerating gifted **kids** (children) in the mainstream classroom.*

Be cautious when using phrasal verbs

Phrasal verbs are **multi-word verbs** (e.g. *put forward, bring up, talk about*) comprising a verb and an adverb and/or a preposition.

- Many phrasal verbs are informal, e.g. *bring up* (raise), *work out* (calculate), *pick out* (select), *find out* (discover).
- Some are neutral, e.g. *refer to* (mention), *engage in* (undertake).
- Others are formal, e.g. *adhere to* (follow), *disabuse of* (persuade).

While some phrasal verbs are appropriate, many (especially more recent ones) are less formal than single-word verbs.

Avoid asking rhetorical questions

Rhetorical questions are questions for which an answer is not expected. They are commonly used in presentations and in journalistic writing.

Replace rhetorical questions with statements, e.g. *If the effectiveness of the treatment is questionable, then why are medical practitioners recommending it?*



The effectiveness of the treatment is questionable, so it is unclear why medical practitioners are recommending it.

Write complete sentences

Write complete sentences instead of short, simple sentences with additional points in parentheses (). Doing the latter renders sentences 'choppy' and casual. You may also risk underdeveloping your ideas.

TIP

In formal writing, parentheses should only be used for in-text referencing and introducing definitions/abbreviations.

Informal example: *Smith's chapter on the UN was comprehensive (i.e. he reviewed research from 1980-2010).*

Formal example: *In his chapter on the United Nations (UN), Smith (2013) reviews research conducted from 1980-2010.*

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