



UNIVERSITY OF
PORTSMOUTH
ASK - ACADEMIC
SKILLS UNIT

Academic Writing Style.

In most assignments, you need to write in an academic style. However, there is no recipe for writing a perfect assignment, and different disciplines and subject areas have their own styles. For example, writing for the sciences, humanities or social sciences require different styles. **Therefore, it is vital that you learn your discipline or subject area conventions.** Also, writing is an intensely personal activity and everyone develops his or her own approach. Nonetheless, there are some broadly accepted ways of writing academically.

This handout first outlines the basic elements of academic writing. Secondly, it provides a paragraph which has been written in an informal, colloquial style, which was then rewritten in an academic style.

Academic Style.

This is difficult to define, but we can perhaps identify five technical qualities that make a piece of writing “academic”. The acronym FOCSI can be formed from these qualities, which are being: **formal, objective, cautious, succinct, and impersonal.** In addition, all academic writing should be **clear, concise and precise**, especially in the sciences and technology, and in reports.

Formal. This means avoiding common colloquial or spoken language.

You should not use casual, spoken language in your assignments. Words like “stuff”, “really” and “things” and phrases like “a bit” and “sort of” are casual language. Sentence fragments that are acceptable in everyday speech, and contractions, should be avoided. Examples of contractions are: “isn’t”, “didn’t”, “couldn’t”, “wouldn’t”, and “it’ll”. You should not use etc to stand for et cetera. It is better to say “for example”. You should avoid phrasing questions so that they have a question mark at the end of the sentence.

Objective. This means standing back from others’ work and your own.

Three key elements are: critiquing your own work as well as others’ work; writing in a more impersonal or neutral style, for example, not using “I”; and including and tackling material which you disagree with or which challenges your own work. Please note that being critical can be positive as well as negative, and therefore includes agreeing with arguments, finding alternatives, or challenging current debates. However, in some fields and for some types of assignment, this type of criticality may not be appropriate or may only be used sparingly. Nonetheless, most types of assignment require you to demonstrate that you have engaged objectively with **all** the material, and have stood back from your own ideas, perspective, assumptions and beliefs. Please also see the section below on being impersonal.

Cautious. This means not being too black and white.

Academic writing is often rather cautious. This is because we are dealing with complex areas of knowledge. Beware of words like 'should', 'ought' and 'must', and think carefully before using words like 'definite(ly)'. Academic work is open-minded and enquiring; as a student you should generally question arguments rather than being too certain. Words like 'possibly', 'probably', 'likely', 'seems', 'may' and 'could' tend to feature in good academic writing.

Succinct. This means not being wordy.

Some texts might make you think that academic writing should be complex and long-winded, but in fact the opposite is true. Readers of your assignments need to understand exactly what you mean, in as few words as possible. When re-reading what you have written, you should always check that you have been as precise and concise as possible. However, you need to ensure that you have provided all the necessary information and details. You have to decide what to prioritise: what to leave in or leave out.

Impersonal. This means writing in a more impartial style.

In essays and reports, you normally write in a more impersonal style, so you should avoid using "I", "my", or "me". You should also avoid using "we", "our" or "us". For example, instead of writing "I am surprised that ...", you might write "It is surprising that ...". There are some exceptions to this rule, for example in reflective writing assignments and portfolios. These more reflective assignments sometimes require you to evaluate your own experiences or attitudes, therefore a more personal style is appropriate.

Examples of colloquial and academic writing styles.

Colloquial Writing.

There's a lot of arguing about the Spinnaker. Because it's so tall you can see it from all around, but does this mean it's a good thing for the economy etc? It's really late. It was meant to be ready for the Millenium (so much for the "Millenium Tower", it's just been costing us money all that time too) and it's not going to employ as many people as lost their jobs in the dockyard over the years. And it'll take ages for them to get back the cost from people who go up it.

Academic Writing.

Portsmouth's Spinnaker Tower is controversial in financial terms. At 170 metres (*The Spinnaker Tower*, 2014), it dominates the city's harbourside and was expected to have a positive impact on the local economy. However, income from visitors to the tower, and the expected boost to the local economy from increased tourism and employment, was lost because the project was delayed several times (Dyckhoff, 2005, p. 14). It may take twenty-five years for income from visitors to equal the cost of construction (Dyckhoff, 2005, p. 15), and the local economy will probably be unable to recoup the lost income.

References.

The Spinnaker Tower. (2014). Retrieved from the BBC Hampshire website:
http://www.bbc.co.uk/hampshire/content/articles/2005/07/19/spinnaker_feature.shtml

Dykhoff, T. (2005). *It's tall but it's pointless.* Retrieved from
<http://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/its-tall-but-its-pointless-sbrcxvqq12>

If you would like an ASK tutorial please contact us.

Email: academicskills@port.ac.uk.

Phone: 02392 843462.

Visit: Third Floor, Nuffield Building.

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