Style and Register

An academic piece of writing should have an academic formal register (style). A formal register is designed to place a distance between the writer and the reader. Compare the following paragraphs:

**Informal:** And when it comes to critical care, we are often the biggest provider of information to patients, relatives and other members of the interdisciplinary team. So, it’s really important that you’ve got the right skills and understanding needed for your job. With the right knowledge you can cut down on complications and make patient outcomes better.

**Formal:** Moreover, with regards to critical care, nurses are often the key provider of information to patients, relatives and other members of the interdisciplinary team. Therefore, it is essential that nurses acquire the relevant skills and understanding required of their role. With the correct knowledge the risk of complications can be reduced, whilst patient outcomes can be improved.

The second paragraph sounds much more erudite and scholarly than the first as it is written in a formal academic style.

**Ways to make the style of your writing more formal**

**Passive**

The passive tense is commonly used in academic writing when the writer wants to focus on the action (what) rather than the agent (who). Compare the following sentences:

*Active:* Hurricane Katrina damaged over 40% of houses in the port.

*Passive:* Over 40% of houses in the port were damaged by Hurricane Katrina.

Instead of ‘they say’, ‘I will explain x’, or ‘you can see x’ you could write ‘it is claimed that’, ‘x will be explained’, or ‘x can be seen’.
Contractions

Avoid using contractions (short forms) e.g. ‘it’s’, ‘don’t’, ‘won’t’, hasn’t’, or ‘can’t’. Instead, use the long form as it is generally considered to be more formal e.g. ‘it is’, ‘does not’, ‘will not’, ‘has not’, or ‘cannot’.

I/you/we/they/he/she

The consensus amongst academics has always been that you should never use first person ‘I’, ‘we’ and ‘us’, or second person ‘you’. However, the rules for the use of ‘I’, ‘you’ and ‘we’ are changing, and such terms are becoming more commonly accepted in academic writing, especially when the writer is describing his/her project or perspective.

In contrast, it is generally accepted that ‘you’, ‘he’, ‘she’ and ‘they’ sound overly friendly and chatty, and should therefore be avoided. These words can also make your writing non-specific and unclear. In the example paragraph at the start of this handout replacing ‘you’ with ‘nurses’ makes the sentence clearer and more specific. We advise that it is always best to check with your personal tutor or supervisor what the writing conventions are for your subject.

NB. In some disciplines, such as in health studies and the arts, students are often required to write in a reflective style, drawing upon their own experiences e.g. ‘I can now appreciate the role of the nurse in…’. In reflective writing it is acceptable to use terms such as ‘I’, ‘she’ and ‘he’ although again, using terms such as ‘the author’, or ‘the patient’ will make your writing sound more academic.

Phrasal verbs

Phrasal verbs (multi-word verbs) are less common in academic writing. For example, instead of using the terms ‘take out’ and ‘put in’, the writer might use ‘extract’ and ‘insert’. Although the tendency is to avoid using phrasal verbs, you may come across some within your studies – ‘to carry out research’ is a commonly used expression!

| look into   | → | investigate          | break out | → | start          |
| come over   | → | approach             | carry on  | → | continue       |
| cut down    | → | reduce               | look at   | → | observe        |
Slang


- a bit → slightly, fairly, rather, somewhat
- sort of/kind of → reasonably, relatively, rather, somewhat
- lots of/a lot of → a number of, numerous, a significant/considerable number of
- really/very → highly, extremely, exceptionally
- like → such as

Linking Words

Use linking words to help your writing sound more scholarly. Linking words will also help you to maintain flow and establish clear relationships between ideas. Avoid using ‘and’, ‘so’ or ‘but’ at the beginning of sentences, and try to avoid using ‘etc.’ and ‘like’ (to exemplify).

- Addition = in addition, moreover, furthermore, additionally, along with
- Cause and effect = as a result, consequently, therefore, thus, hence
- Contrast = however, in contrast, on the other hand, while, whereas
- Illustration = for example, for instance, such as, namely, including

Last but not least, poor spelling, punctuation and grammar appear sloppy and unscholarly. Always proofread your work and use the spelling and grammar function (F7 on Microsoft Word). Choosing the ‘synonyms’ option will help you to expand your vocabulary (Shift F7).

Remember that the level of formality of academic writing can differ e.g. a case study may vary slightly from a dissertation. Ultimately, it is your responsibility as a writer to familiarise yourself with the different genres common in your subject. If in doubt, check with your personal tutor/supervisor.

Task

The sentences below are all written in an informal style. Change them to make them sound more formal and scholarly.

1. **There’s** been quite a **lot of** interest in how background sounds **like** music affect **your** ability to concentrate.
2. But, about 45,000 new cases of breast cancer are found every year, making it a really common cancer in the UK.
3. And I will take a look at the effect of different grassland management practices.
5. By the way, export figures won't get better until the economy gets better.
6. In the past five years, they did studies which have looked at the effect of CBT on depression.

Suggested answers
1. There has been considerable interest in how background sounds such as music affect an individual's ability to concentrate.
2. However, approximately 45,000 new cases of breast cancer are diagnosed every year, making it the most common form of cancer in the UK.
3. In addition, the effect of different grassland management practices will be examined.
4. Jones (2009) notes that a significant number of problems arose soon after the nursing best practice guidelines were implemented.
5. Incidentally, export figures are unlikely to improve until the economy recovers.
6. In the past five years, a number of studies have examined the effect of CBT on depression.

References

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