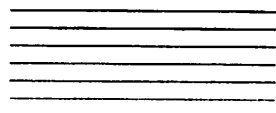


UNIT  
2.13

# Style



There is no one correct style of academic writing, but in general it should attempt to be accurate, impersonal and objective. For example, personal pronouns like 'I' and idioms (i.e. informal language) are used less often than in other kinds of writing. Students should study examples of writing in their own subject area, and then aim to develop their own 'voice'. This unit gives guidelines for an appropriate style, and provides practice.

## 1 Components of academic style

- Study this paragraph and underline any examples of poor style.

How to make people work harder is a topic that lots of people have written about in the last few years. There are lots of different theories etc and I think some of them are ok. When we think about this we should remember the old Chinese proverb, that you can lead a horse to water but you can't make it drink. So how do we increase production? It's quite a complex subject but I'll just talk about a couple of ideas.

Some of the problems with the style of this paragraph can be analysed as follows:

Poor style	Reason
How to make people work harder . . .	Imprecise vocabulary – use 'motivation'
. . . lots of people . . .	Vague – give names
. . . the last few years.	Vague – give dates
lots of different . . .	Avoid 'lots of'

Poor style	Reason
... etc ...	Avoid using 'etc.' and 'so on'
... I think ...	Too personal
... are ok.	Too informal
When we think about this ...	Too personal
... the old Chinese proverb ...	Do not quote proverbs or similar expressions
So how do we increase production?	Avoid rhetorical questions
It's quite a ...	Avoid contractions
... I'll just talk about a couple ...	Too personal and informal

The paragraph could be re-written in more suitable style:

Motivation has been the subject of numerous studies during recent decades, but this essay will focus on Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory (1943) and Herzberg's two-factor theory (1966). Their contemporary relevance to the need to motivate employees effectively will be examined critically, given that this can be considered crucial to a firm's survival in the current economic climate.

## 2 Guidelines

There are no rules for academic style that apply to all situations, and all academic disciplines. The following guidelines should help you develop a style of your own.

- (a) Do not use idiomatic or colloquial vocabulary: *kids, boss*. Instead use standard English: *children, manager*.
- (b) Use vocabulary accurately. There is a difference between *rule* and *law*, or *weather* and *climate*, which you are expected to know if you study these subjects.
- (c) Be as precise as possible when dealing with facts or figures. Avoid phrases such as *about a hundred* or *hundreds of years ago*. If it is necessary to estimate numbers, use *approximately* rather than *about*.
- (d) Conclusions should use tentative language. Avoid absolute statements such as *unemployment causes crime*. Instead, use cautious phrases: *unemployment may cause crime* or *tends to cause crime*.
- (e) Avoid adverbs that show your personal attitude: *luckily, remarkably, surprisingly*.
- (f) Do not contract verb forms: *don't, can't*. Use the full form: *do not, cannot*.

- (g) Although academic English tends to use the passive more than standard English, it should not be overused. Both are needed. Compare:

*Galileo discovered the moons of Jupiter.*

*The moons of Jupiter were discovered by Galileo.*

In the first case, the focus is on Galileo, in the second (passive) on the moons.

► See Unit 2.9 Passives

- (h) Avoid the following:

- *like* for introducing examples. Use *such as* or *for instance*.
  - *thing* and combinations *nothing* or *something*. Use *factor*, *issue* or *topic*.
  - *lots of*. Use *a significant/considerable number*.
  - *little/big*. Use *small/large*.
  - 'get' phrases such as *get better/worse*. Use *improve* and *deteriorate*.
  - *good/bad* are simplistic. Use *positive/negative* (e.g. *the changes had several positive aspects*).
- (i) Do not use question forms such as *Why did war break out in 1914?* Instead, use statements: *There were three reasons for the outbreak of war . . .*
- (j) Avoid numbering sections of your text, except in reports and long essays. Use conjunctions and signposting expressions to introduce new sections (*Turning to the question of detecting cancer . . .*).
- (k) When writing lists, avoid using *etc.* or *and so on*. Insert *and* before the last item: *The main products were pharmaceuticals, electronic goods and confectionery.*
- (l) Avoid using two-word verbs such as *go on* or *bring up* if there is a suitable synonym. Use *continue* or *raise*.

► See Unit 3.4 Academic Vocabulary: Verbs and Adverbs

### 3 Practice A

- In the following sentences, underline examples of bad style and rewrite them in a more suitable way.

- (a) Another thing to think about is the chance of crime getting worse.

\_\_\_\_\_

- (b) Regrettably these days lots of people don't have jobs.

\_\_\_\_\_

- (c) Sometime soon they will find a vaccine for malaria.  
\_\_\_\_\_
- (d) A few years ago the price of property in Japan went down a lot.  
\_\_\_\_\_
- (e) You can't always trust the numbers in that report.  
\_\_\_\_\_
- (f) Sadly, the high inflation led to poverty, social unrest and so on.  
\_\_\_\_\_
- (g) He was over the moon when he won the prize.  
\_\_\_\_\_
- (h) I think we should pay students to study.  
\_\_\_\_\_
- (i) A few years ago they allowed women to vote.  
\_\_\_\_\_
- (j) What were the main causes of the Russian Revolution?  
\_\_\_\_\_

#### 4 Avoiding repetition and redundancy

Instead of repeating the same word in a short text:

*Most family businesses employ less than 10 people. These businesses . . .*

Try to make the text more interesting by using synonyms:

*Most family businesses employ less than 10 people. These firms . . .*

#### ► See Unit 3.11 Synonyms

Redundancy (i.e. repeating an idea or including an irrelevant point) suggests that the writer is not fully in control of the material. It gives the impression that either he or she does not properly understand the language or is trying to 'pad' the essay by repeating the same point. Avoid statements such as:

*Homelessness is a global problem in the whole world.*

Good writing aims for economy and precision:

*Homelessness is a global problem.*

- In the following text, remove all repetition and redundancy, rewriting where necessary.

## **FAST FOOD**

Currently these days, fast food is growing in popularity. Fast food is a kind of food that people can buy ready to eat or cook quickly. This essay examines the advantages of fast food and the drawbacks of fast food. First above all, fast food is very convenient. Most of the people who work in offices are very busy, so that they do not have time to go to their homes for lunch. But the people who work in offices can eat in restaurants such as McDonald's, which are franchised in hundreds of countries. In addition, the second benefit of fast food is its cheapness. As it is produced in large quantities, this high volume means that the companies can keep costs down. As a result fast food is usually less expensive than a meal in a conventional restaurant.

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## **5 Varying sentence length**

Short sentences are clear and easy to read:

*Car scrappage schemes have been introduced in many countries.*

But too many short sentences are monotonous:

*Car scrappage schemes have been introduced in many countries. They offer a subsidy to buyers of new cars. The buyers must scrap an old vehicle. The schemes are designed to stimulate the economy. They also increase fuel efficiency.*

Long sentences are more interesting, but can be difficult to construct and read:

*Car scrappage schemes, which offer a subsidy to buyers of new cars (who must scrap an old vehicle) have been introduced in many countries; the schemes are designed to stimulate the economy and also increase fuel efficiency.*

Effective writing normally uses a mixture of long and short sentences, often using a short sentence to introduce the topic:

*Car scrappage schemes have been introduced in many countries. They offer a subsidy to buyers of new cars, who must scrap an old vehicle. The schemes are designed to stimulate the economy and also increase fuel efficiency.*

- Rewrite the following paragraph so that instead of six short sentences, there are two long and two short sentences.

Worldwide, enrolments in higher education are increasing. In developed countries over half of all young people enter college. Similar trends are seen in China and South America. This growth has put financial strain on state university systems. Many countries are asking students and parents to contribute. This leads to a debate about whether students or society benefit from tertiary education.

- The following sentence is too long. Divide it into shorter ones.

China is one developing country (but not the only one) which has imposed fees on students since 1997, but the results have been surprising: enrolments, especially in the most expensive universities, have continued to rise steeply, growing 200 per cent overall between 1997 and 2011; it seems in this case that higher fees attract rather than discourage students, who see them as a sign of a good education, and compete more fiercely for places, leading to the result that a place at a good college can cost \$8,000 per year for fees and maintenance.

Until you feel confident in your writing, it is better to use shorter rather than longer sentences. This should make your meaning as clear as possible.

## 6 The use of caution

A cautious style is necessary in many areas of academic writing to avoid making statements that can be contradicted:

*Demand for healthcare usually exceeds supply.*

*Most students find writing exam essays difficult.*

*Fertility rates tend to fall as societies get richer.*

Areas where caution is particularly important include:

- (a) outlining a hypothesis that needs to be tested (e.g. in an introduction)
- (b) discussing the results of a study, which may not be conclusive
- (c) commenting on the work of other writers
- (d) making predictions (normally with **may** or **might**)

Caution is also needed to avoid making statements that are too simplistic:

*Crime is linked to poor education.*

Such statements are rarely completely true. There is usually an exception that needs to be considered. Caution can be shown in several ways:

*Crime may be linked to poor education.* (modal verb)

*Crime is frequently linked to poor education.* (adverb)

*Crime tends to be linked to poor education.* (verb)

- Complete the table below with more examples.

Modals	Adverbs	Verb/phrase
<i>can</i>	<i>commonly</i>	<i>tends to</i>

- ▶ See Unit 2.8 Generalisations

## 7 Using modifiers

Another way to express caution is to use **quite**, **rather** or **fairly** before an adjective:

*a fairly accurate summary*

*a rather inconvenient location*

*quite a significant discovery*

NB: **quite** is often used before the article. It is generally used positively, while **rather** tends to be used negatively.

- Insert **quite/rather/fairly** in the following to emphasise caution.

- The company's efforts to save energy were successful.
- The survey was a comprehensive study of student opinion.
- His second book had a hostile reception.
- The first year students were fascinated by her lectures.
- The latest type of arthritis drug is expensive.

## 8 Practice B

- Rewrite the following sentences in a more cautious way.

- Private companies are more efficient than state-owned businesses.
- Exploring space is a waste of valuable resources.

- (c) Older students perform better at university than younger ones.
- (d) Word-of-mouth is the best kind of advertising.
- (e) English pronunciation is confusing.
- (f) Some cancers are caused by psychological factors.
- (g) Global warming will cause the sea level to rise.
- (h) Most shopping will be done on the Internet in 10 years' time.