

What is Academic Writing Style?

If you want to be recognized as an educated person, it helps to write like one. Academic writing is different from personal, motivational or literary writing. Social science writing style is impersonal, plain, and precise. For class, write in an academic style.

Avoid writing in the first person. This means avoiding “I,” “my,” “you,” “we,” “our,” “us,” or “this observer.” Do not use phrases like, “I think that,” or “in my opinion,” or “I do not agree that.” Simply omit such phrases, and go ahead with your statement. That said, academic writing generally does not include opinions. Statements of fact (unless common knowledge) should be cited to the original source. This both avoids plagiarism (taking other people’s ideas without attribution) and allows the reader the ability to track down original source material for their own research or fact checking.

When relating factual information from sources, avoid such phrases as “we see in chapter four that” or “the authors tell us that.” Simply omit such phrases and get to the point. It is better to paraphrase than to quote. If you quote directly, use APA format (which includes the page number for quotations). Avoid long quotations, and even short quotations should be avoided unless the quotation is exceptionally apt and eloquent or the quotation says something so odd or vulgar that you can’t really paraphrase.

Refer to books and articles by the author’s last name and the year of publication. Do not list the title of anything in your text. The titles are listed only in the bibliography.

Write short, complete sentences in paragraph format. A new paragraph is an indication that a new idea is coming. If the new idea is a whole different subject, include an appropriate transition. Many students seem unsure of when to end a paragraph. Paragraphs should be about four or five sentences; some might be only two sentences. Paragraphs should never be a page long.

Do not write in shopping or laundry list style. Avoid contractions. Do not use slang, colloquialisms, or vulgarities. Avoid jargon or abbreviations such as P.D. or PO or USA. Use technical language sparingly. Do not capitalize words just because they are important.

Academic writing is intended to inform with data, not persuade with emotion. Write statements, not questions. Avoid superlatives and exaggerations. Eliminate words which suggest mindless credulity, such as “obviously,” “clearly,” “certainly,” “no doubt.” Instead use words like “possibly,” “probably,” “apparently,” or “evidently,” depending on which is most accurate. Though you may have strong opinions, remain objective and intellectually honest by acknowledging opposing facts, data, and viewpoints.

Avoid preaching by avoiding words such as “should,” “ought,” or “must.” Instead, explain why something is beneficial and let the readers come to their own conclusion. Be factual, not emotional.

When you re-read and edit your essays—something I want to presume you do and get you used to doing if you do not already do it—think about whether the words say what you want them to say. Have you used the word correctly, including spelling and tense? Is it the correct word for what you are trying to express? Have you actually said something substantive or merely strung together a bunch of words that seem like a sentence but convey no useful information? Have you eliminated unnecessary words, phrases, sentences, and even paragraphs.

Adopted by Peter Moskos from Professor Dorothy Schulz’s “Social Science Writing Style.”

This is one of four writing guides: “Formatting Notes for Academic Writing,” “Academic Writing Style,” “Academic Sources,” and *Grammar 101*.