

## Academic Language

Academic language is a formal style of writing used in universities and scholarly publications. It helps convey ideas clearly, objectively, and professionally. This handout will cover the essential features of academic language, addressing topics such as formality, clarity, conciseness, and inclusivity. Understanding and applying these principles will improve your academic writing and enhance your credibility in scholarly work.

### Key Features of Academic Language

#### *Formal Tone*

- Avoid casual language and overly conversational phrasing. (e.g., Instead of “kids these days,” write “young people” or “students.”)
- Use complete words instead of contractions. (e.g., “do not” instead of “don’t”)
- Maintain a neutral, professional tone appropriate for academic contexts. (e.g., Avoid emotional or exaggerated language like “the results were amazing.”)

#### *Clarity and Precision*

- Define key concepts clearly to avoid confusion. (e.g., Instead of “this thing impacted the outcome,” specify the term: “This variable impacted the test results.”)
- Avoid filler words that do not add meaning. (Examples of filler words include “actually,” “basically,” “kind of,” “very,” and “really.”)

#### *Objective Stance*

- Support claims with evidence rather than personal opinions. (e.g., Instead of “I believe climate change is a problem,” write “Research indicates that climate change presents significant global challenges.”)
- Write in the third-person voice instead of using “I” or “we” in formal writing. (e.g., Replace “In this paper, I will address...” with “This paper addresses...”)

#### *Complex Sentence Structures*

- Use varied sentence structures to enhance readability. (e.g., Combine ideas to avoid short, choppy sentences. For example, revise “The author introduces the theory. She explains its significance.” to “The author introduces the theory and explains its significance.”)
- Avoid excessive complexity that may hinder understanding. (e.g., You can revise the too complex “Notwithstanding the aforementioned evidentiary support, it can be postulated...” to the much more simplified “Although there is supporting evidence, it is possible...”)

### Basic Formality Rules

- Spell out numbers below ten. (e.g., State “three participants” instead of “3 participants.”)
- Avoid abbreviations unless they have been clearly explained previously in the paper. (e.g., Do not use “APA recommends...” if you have not already identified APA as being equivalent to American Psychological Association earlier in the essay.)
- Eliminate casual phrases and expressions. (e.g., Avoid words like “gonna,” “wanna,” “a lot,” and “stuff”; instead use “going to,” “want to,” “many,” and “materials.”)

### Bias in Academic Writing

Academic writing should be inclusive and free of bias, which can be achieved by taking the following steps:

- recognize and address implicit biases (includes unintentional attitudes or stereotypes that influence understanding, actions, and decisions) in writing.
- use gender-neutral language (e.g., “they” instead of “he” or “she”), and replace biased phrases with neutral alternatives (e.g., “humankind” instead of “mankind”).
- avoid stereotypes and generalizations.

#### Example

**Biased:** “A doctor should always listen carefully to his patients.”

**Neutral:** “Doctors should always listen carefully to their patients.”

**Stereotype:** “If she is a nurse, then she must be caring and compassionate.”

**Neutral:** “Nurses are frequently described as caring and compassionate.”

### Clarity and Conciseness

Effective academic writing should be clear and concise:

- avoid redundancy and wordiness—eliminate unnecessary words.
- avoid vague references—ensure “this,” “that,” and “these” are followed by clear subjects.
- choose precise words; understand connotations and select words with accurate meanings.

#### Examples

**Wordy:** “The study spanned a period of seven weeks.”

**Concise:** “The study spanned seven weeks.”

**Vague:** “This is important.”

**Clear:** “This finding is important.”

## Hedging: Softening Claims in Academic Writing

Hedging helps writers maintain objectivity and avoid overgeneralizations. We created a separate handout dedicated to [hedging](#), so this section will provide only a brief overview of the concept.

- Use words like “suggests,” “may indicate,” or “appears to” to soften claims.
- Avoid absolute statements unless they are definitively supported by evidence.

### *Example*

**Absolute:** “This study proves that X causes Y.”

**Hedged:** “This study suggests that X may cause Y.”

## Active vs. Passive Voice

Active voice is preferred in most writing contexts instead of passive voice. When using active voice, the subject is directly performing the action of the verb, which leads to clearer and more concise writing. We created a separate handout dedicated to [passive voice](#), so this section will provide only a brief overview of the concept.

- **Active Voice:** The subject performs the action. (e.g., “The researchers conducted the experiment.”)
- **Passive Voice:** The action is emphasized, not the subject. (e.g., “The experiment was conducted by the researchers.”)
- Use active voice for clarity and directness.
- Use passive voice in certain situations when you do not know who performed the action, when you want to avoid assigning blame, or when the action is more important than who did it (e.g., in scientific writing when the results are the focus—not the researchers).

## Transitions and Flow

Transitions help connect ideas and improve readability. Transitional words and phrases can help you link your ideas both within paragraphs and between sections of your paper. We created a separate handout dedicated to [transitions](#), so this section will provide only a brief overview of the concept.

- Use transitional words like “however,” “therefore,” and “in addition.”
- Choose transitions based on context. (e.g., cause and effect, contrast, or addition)

## Strategies for Improving Academic Language

Finally, to improve academic language skills further, always consider taking the following steps.

- Read academic sources—especially within your field of study—to observe style and tone.
- Self-edit using a checklist for clarity, formality, and bias.

- Seek feedback from professors, peers, and/or Writing Center tutors.
- Revise multiple drafts before submission.

### Activity: Revising Academic Language

Revise the following sentences to align with academic writing principles. Take two steps:

1. identify informal language, biased claims, and vague phrases.
2. revise the paragraph using academic language principles.

“I think the research was really good, and it shows that smoking is bad for health. The scientist did his work well, and the results prove that smoking is harmful.”

### Answer Key for Activity

Please note that answers will vary. One possible revision is provided below along with explanations for why the edits were made.

“The research suggests that smoking negatively impacts health. The study’s methodology appears thorough, and the results indicate that smoking is harmful.”

1. Informal language removed: “really good” and “bad for health” were replaced with more precise and formal terms (“negatively impacts” and “harmful”).
2. Subjectivity removed: “I think” was deleted to maintain an objective tone.
3. Hedging was added to soften the claim: “prove” was changed to “indicate.”
4. Bias removed: “The scientist did his work well...” was changed to “The study’s methodology appears thorough...”

### References

“Academic Writing.” *Purdue Online Writing Lab*. Purdue University, n.d.

[owl.purdue.edu/owl/general\\_writing/academic\\_writing/index.html](http://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/academic_writing/index.html).