



Academic Writing

5. Formal writing

It's not what you say, but how you say it and who you say it to!

In this unit and unit **6: Expressing opinion and attitude in academic writing**, our focus is on academic English as formal and objective. There will be some unavoidable overlap in these sections: this is because various language features which contribute to the formal sounding nature of academic writing also result in the writing sounding objective.

In the first section of this module on academic English we discussed the differences between spoken and written language. Written language was characterised as quite structured, formal, impersonal and wordy, while spoken language was less structured, informal, and more subjective. Needless to say, there are situations in which spoken language displays more of the characteristics of written language (such as a lecture), and written language which is more like speech (such as a hastily scribbled note to a friend).¹ In other words, there are contexts in which formal language is expected, and others where informal language is predominant. If a speaker or writer uses the wrong level of formality or informality for a particular context, it is immediately obvious and will result in less successful communication. For example, in the case of academic writing, informal language would make the writing sound like the content is only anecdote and impression rather than the synthesis of research, analysis and critical thinking.

What makes writing sound informal?

There are a number of language features which contribute to writing sounding **informal**. The main ones are listed below with examples and explanations.²

Language features	Examples and explanations
inclusion of personal pronouns such as <i>I, we, you, our</i>	<i>I think you'll agree with me.</i> Personal pronouns such as <i>I</i> establish a more personal and subsequently informal tone because the reader is aware of the writer's presence in the text. Similarly the pronoun <i>you</i> draws the reader into the text.
inclusion of verbs which show the writer or speaker's feelings	<i>I disliked Prosser's conclusion.</i> Clear expressions of personal feelings make the reader aware of the writer's presence.
use of colloquial expressions	<i>So far the human resources manager is turning a blind eye to the problems.</i> Colloquial expressions are typically used in less formal contexts such as conversations with friends.



1. Spoken and written languages: some important differences



2. Nominal groups: nouns and their structure



3. Abstract concepts and abstract writings



4. The influence of Greek and Latin on academic vocabulary



5. Formal writing



6. Expressing opinion and attitude in academic writing

Learning objectives

This module will help you to:

- understand some differences between spoken and written language, and the importance of these differences for academic writing
- gain insights into why academic writing is typically abstract and complex. In other words, learn about:
 - the influence of Greek and Latin on academic vocabulary
 - the predominance of complex noun phrases
 - the concept of abstraction and how this is realised grammatically
- understand formal academic style
- learn how opinions and evaluations are expressed in academic writing



use of everyday language	<i>Retirement is something most of us must face sooner or later</i> As with colloquial expressions, everyday language typically occurs in less formal contexts.
use of strong arguments and emotive language	<i>Age can never be totally irrelevant.</i> <i>The conditions were appalling.</i> Emotional arguments are persuasive and subjective. These factors result in a less formal and objective text.
use of rhetorical questions	<i>What on earth has this got to do with the topic?</i> Rhetorical questions invite a response from the audience. This reduces the distance between writer and reader.

What makes academic English formal?

So far we have identified a number of language features which contribute to a text sounding informal. As academic writing is considered formal and objective, the previously identified language features are typically absent from successful academic texts. What language features then contribute to the 'formality' of academic English? The main ones are listed below:

Language features	Examples and explanations
nominalisation	<i>Resource allocation is a significant factor.</i> Nominalisation refers to the process of turning verbs into nouns (<i>allocate – allocation</i>). It occurs in abstract and technical writing, which is predominantly formal. ³
specialist language (in bold) Use of the passive (underlined) Unless an agent is included (<i>by whom</i>), the passive voice does not tell us who does/did an action. In other words, personal pronouns can be avoided by using the passive voice.	<i>In many radiotherapy centres where <u>planning for external beam treatments is performed</u> by radiation therapists, the treatment sheet and its calculations <u>are independently checked</u> by staff from a different educational background, typically a radiotherapy physicist.</i>

Moving from the informal to the formal

When editing your university assignments, you should also check your work for its level of formality. However, this is not just a matter of pinpointing and removing all the personal pronouns such as *I, we*, rhetorical questions, colloquial language etc. When shifting your work from an informal style to a more formal one, you often need to change the distribution of information at sentence level, and perhaps reorganise the whole paragraph. For example, consider the following sentence which could introduce a conclusion.

In conclusion, in this essay I have argued that multiculturalism is good for economic development.

Alternatively, the student could remove the first person pronoun (I) and replace this with a passive construction, as well as replacing the rather unsophisticated descriptor good.

In conclusion, in this essay it is argued that multiculturalism is beneficial for economic development.

Here some surface changes have been made, which result in a slightly more formal version. However, it should be said that some lecturers will not object to the use of *I* in essays, but they will object to clumsy expressions which are the result of trying not to say *I*, (and some lecturers may consider *it is argued* to be one of those clumsy expressions, when it is clear that it is the student who is presenting the arguments). An informal tone is more likely to result from the accumulative effect of a number of elements which result in an informal style. It is possible to avoid the *it is argued* construction by shifting the distribution of information in the sentence:

The argument that multiculturalism is beneficial for economic development has focused on ... (followed by a list of the main arguments in the essay).

Here the focus is the *argument* that has been presented throughout the essay. Another option would be to start the sentence with *The benefits of multiculturalism for economic development are in the areas of ...* Both of these constructions are more formal due to **nominalisation** (see Unit 2), and the last construction is more formal and more objective (compare *good for economic development*, and *the benefits of multiculturalism for economic development*). So when editing your work for a more formal academic style, it may be necessary to change the distribution of information in the sentence, rather than just replace individual elements with more formal ones.

Task 6.1 Identifying formal and informal aspects of language ⁴

The following excerpt is from a student assignment. It contains a number of language features which result in the text sounding not quite as formal as it should for academic writing of a high standard

Read the text carefully, then write the informal language features in the space provided below:

When a company goes bankrupt, there are liabilities such as accounts payable to creditors, employees' wages, and the resulting increase in unemployment. Insurance companies and the banks have to take action to fix their side of the problem in regards to the company's losses. So who is ultimately responsible for the liabilities? Society can't be blamed totally for the liabilities as it is everyone who is involved, especially the company itself.

Key: formal language

6.1 identifying formal and informal aspects of language

Informal elements:

- use of everyday language (*goes bankrupt, take action to fix, can't, blamed*);
- rhetorical question (*So who is ...*);
- use of strong argument (*have to*)

Formal elements:

- nominalisation (*unemployment, losses, liabilities, increase*),
- specialist language (*liability*)

Endnotes

1. See unit 1 of this module on academic English called **Spoken and written language: some important differences**. The discussion of the spoken and written continuum for spoken and written language is particularly relevant to the discussion here.

2. These examples and explanations have been adapted from Woodward-Kron R, Thomson E & Meek J (2000) *Academic writing: a language based system*, CD-ROM, and from Droga L, Ravelli L (1997) Lecture notes for An Introduction to Academic Purposes, Department of Modern Languages, the University of Wollongong.

3. For an explanation of nominalisation see section 4 of this unit on academic English called **Abstract concepts and abstract writing**.

4. Adapted from *Academic writing: a language based guide*.

References

Woodward-Kron R, Thomson E, & Meek, J (2000). *Academic Writing: a language based guide* (CD-ROM), University of Wollongong.