



## Academic writing

# Formal writing



UNIVERSITY  
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AUSTRALIA

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

Written language is often characterised as quite structured, formal and impersonal, while spoken language as 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 written email to a friend).

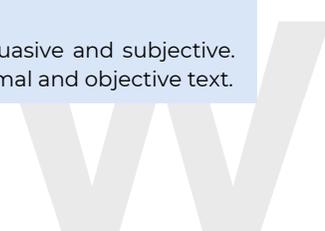
In other words, there are contexts in which formal language is expected, and others where informal language is predominant. If a speaker or writer uses the wrong level of formality or informality for a particular context, it is immediately obvious and will result in less successful communication. For example, in the case of academic writing, informal language would make the writing sound like the content is only your impression rather than a scholarly 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

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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	<b><i>I disliked</i></b> Prosser's conclusion. 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 <b>is turning a blind eye</b> to the problems.</i> Colloquial expressions are typically used in less formal contexts such as conversations with friends.
Use of everyday language	<i>Retirement is something most of us must face <b>sooner or later</b></i> As with colloquial expressions, everyday language typically occurs in less formal contexts.
Use of strong arguments and emotive language	<i>Age can <b>never be</b> totally irrelevant.</i> <i>The conditions were <b>appalling</b>.</i> Emotional arguments are persuasive and subjective. These factors result in a less formal and objective text.



Language features	Examples and explanations
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 <b>allocation</b> 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.
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 <b>radiotherapy</b> centres where planning for <b>external beam treatments</b> <u>is performed</u> by <b>radiation therapists</b>, 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**, 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.

Caution: While nominalisation and the use of passive voice can make your writing impersonal and precise as academic writing is expected to be, some scholars warn that overuse of formal language can make your writing seem dense and lifeless (Mewburn, Firth and Lehmann, 2019).

### TASK1 IDENTIFYING FORMAL AND INFORMAL ASPECTS OF LANGUAGE

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.

**What features of informal language occur in this paragraph?**

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**What features of formal language occur in this paragraph?**

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**For suggested answers see the Key**



## KEY: FORMAL LANGUAGE

### 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*).

## REFERENCES

Mewburn, L, Firth, K, Lehmann, S (2019), *How to fix your academic writing trouble: A practical guide*, Open University Press, London.

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

## FURTHER READING

Bailey, S (2015), *Academic Writing: A handbook for international students* (4th edn), Routledge, London and New York.

Published by Learning Development — University of Wollongong (2020). Adapted in part from Woodward-Kron, R, Thomson, E & Meek, J (2000) *Academic Writing: A Language Based Guide*, University of Wollongong and from Droga, L and Ravelli, L (1997) *Lecture notes for An Introduction to Academic Purposes*, Department of Modern Languages, the University of Wollongong.

