

# Formal language

You can make your writing more formal through the vocabulary that you use. For academic writing:

- choose formal instead of informal vocabulary. For example, ‘somewhat’ is more formal than ‘a bit’, ‘insufficient’ is more formal than ‘not enough’.
- avoid contractions. For example, use ‘did not’ rather than ‘didn’t’.
- avoid emotional language. For example, instead of strong words such as ‘wonderful’ or ‘terrible’, use more moderate words such as ‘helpful’ or ‘problematic’.
- instead of using absolute positives and negatives, such as ‘proof’ or ‘wrong’, use more cautious evaluations, such as ‘strong evidence’ or ‘less convincing’.

# Objective language

Although academic writing usually requires you to be objective and impersonal (not mentioning personal feelings), often you may still have to present your opinion. For example, you may need to:

- interpret findings
- evaluate a theory
- develop an argument
- critique the work of others.

To express your point of view and still write in an objective style, you can use the following strategies.

- Move information around in the sentence to emphasise things and ideas, instead of people and feelings. For example, instead of writing ‘I believe the model is valid, based on these findings’, write ‘These findings indicate that the model is valid’.
- Avoid evaluative words that are based on non-technical judgements and feelings. For example, use ‘valid’ or ‘did not demonstrate’ instead of ‘amazing’ or ‘disappointment’.
- Avoid intense or emotional evaluative language. For example, instead of writing ‘Parents who smoke are obviously abusing their children’, write ‘Secondhand smoke has some harmful effects on children’s health’.
- Use modality to show caution about your views, or to allow room for others to disagree. For example, instead of writing ‘I think secondhand smoke causes cancer’, write ‘There is evidence to support the possibility that secondhand smoke increases the risk of cancer’.
- Find authoritative sources, such as authors, researchers and theorists in books or articles, who support your point of view, and refer to them in your writing. For example, instead of writing ‘Language is, in my view, clearly something social’, write ‘As Halliday (1973) argues, language is intrinsically social’.

Different disciplines often have quite different expectations about how objective or subjective your writing can be. For example, in some fields it is fine to use first person, such as 'my view is that...', while in other fields this is not acceptable. You should look at the convention used in published articles in your discipline area, and check with your lecturer.

## Technical language

As well as using formal language, you also need to write technically. This means that you need to develop a large vocabulary for the concepts specific to the discipline or specialisation you're writing for. To do this, take note of terminology used by your lecturer and tutor, as well as in your readings.

Be careful about the meaning of technical terms. Often the same word has a different meaning in another discipline. For example, 'discourse' is a technical term used in multiple disciplines with different meanings.

Make sure you also understand and use the key categories and relationships in your discipline, that is, the way information and ideas are organised into groups. For example, in the discipline of Law, law is separated into two types: common law and statute law. Knowing these distinctions will help you structure your writing and make it more technical and analytical.

## Types of academic writing

The four main types of academic writing are descriptive, analytical, persuasive and critical. Each of these types of writing has specific language features and purposes.

In many academic texts you will need to use more than one type. For example, in an empirical thesis:

- you will use critical writing in the literature review to show where there is a gap or opportunity in the existing research
- the methods section will be mostly descriptive to summarise the methods used to collect and analyse information
- the results section will be mostly descriptive and analytical as you report on the data you collected
- the discussion section is more analytical, as you relate your findings back to your research questions, and also persuasive, as you propose your interpretations of the findings.

## Descriptive

The simplest type of academic writing is descriptive. Its purpose is to provide facts or information. An example would be a summary of an article or a report of the results of an experiment.

The kinds of instructions for a purely descriptive assignment include: 'identify', 'report', 'record', 'summarise' and 'define'.

## Analytical

It's rare for a university-level text to be purely descriptive. Most academic writing is also analytical. Analytical writing includes descriptive writing, but also requires you to re-organise the facts and information you describe into categories, groups, parts, types or relationships.

Sometimes, these categories or relationships are already part of the discipline, while in other cases you will create them specifically for your text. If you're comparing two theories, you might break your comparison into several parts, for example: how each theory deals with social context, how each theory deals with language learning, and how each theory can be used in practice.

The kinds of instructions for an analytical assignment include: 'analyse', 'compare', 'contrast', 'relate', and 'examine'.

To make your writing more analytical:

- spend plenty of time planning. Brainstorm the facts and ideas, and try different ways of grouping them, according to patterns, parts, similarities and differences. You could use colour-coding, flow charts, tree diagrams or tables.
- create a name for the relationships and categories you find. For example, advantages and disadvantages.
- build each section and paragraph around one of the analytical categories.
- make the structure of your paper clear to your reader, by using topic sentences and a clear introduction.

## Persuasive

In most academic writing, you are required to go at least one step further than analytical writing, to persuasive writing. Persuasive writing has all the features of analytical writing (that is, information plus re-organising the information), with the addition of your own point of view. Most essays are persuasive, and there is a persuasive element in at least the discussion and conclusion of a research article.

Points of view in academic writing can include an argument, recommendation, interpretation of findings or evaluation of the work of others. In persuasive writing, each claim you make needs to be supported by some evidence, for example a reference to research findings or published sources.

The kinds of instructions for a persuasive assignment include: 'argue', 'evaluate', 'discuss', and 'take a position'.

To help reach your own point of view on the facts or ideas:

- read some other researchers' points of view on the topic. Who do you feel is the most convincing?

- look for patterns in the data or references. Where is the evidence strongest?
- list several different interpretations. What are the real-life implications of each one? Which ones are likely to be most useful or beneficial? Which ones have some problems?
- discuss the facts and ideas with someone else. Do you agree with their point of view?

To develop your argument:

- list the different reasons for your point of view
- think about the different types and sources of evidence which you can use to support your point of view
- consider different ways that your point of view is similar to, and different from, the points of view of other researchers
- look for various ways to break your point of view into parts. For example, cost effectiveness, environmental sustainability, scope of real-world application.

To present your argument, make sure:

- your text develops a coherent argument where all the individual claims work together to support your overall point of view
- your reasoning for each claim is clear to the reader
- your assumptions are valid
- you have evidence for every claim you make
- you use evidence that is convincing and directly relevant.

## Critical

Critical writing is common for research, postgraduate and advanced undergraduate writing. It has all the features of persuasive writing, with the added feature of at least one other point of view. While persuasive writing requires you to have your own point of view on an issue or topic, critical writing requires you to consider at least two points of view, including your own.

For example, you may explain a researcher's interpretation or argument and then evaluate the merits of the argument, or give your own alternative interpretation.

Examples of critical writing assignments include a critique of a journal article, or a literature review that identifies the strengths and weaknesses of existing research. The kinds of instructions for critical writing include: 'critique', 'debate', 'disagree' and 'evaluate'.

You need to:

- accurately summarise all or part of the work. This could include identifying the main interpretations, assumptions or methodology.

- have an opinion about the work. Appropriate types of opinion could include pointing out some problems with it, proposing an alternative approach that would be better, and/or defending the work against the critiques of others.
- provide evidence for your point of view. Depending on the specific assignment and the discipline, different types of evidence may be appropriate, such as logical reasoning, reference to authoritative sources and/or research data.

Critical writing requires strong writing skills. You need to thoroughly understand the topic and the issues. You need to develop an essay structure and paragraph structure that allows you to analyse different interpretations and develop your own argument, supported by evidence.