

HINTS ON WRITING IN FORMAL, ACADEMIC ENGLISH

Aim for plain, clear and straightforward writing

Avoid slang and unnecessary jargon

Slang is language which many of us use in everyday conversation; for example “The poem is fab”. However, this sort of language is too informal for academic writing; prefer something like “The poem is enjoyable”.

Jargon is long words which are used in particular contexts, but not always in everyday conversation. There are many examples in the [“What do you think of this piece of writing?” information sheet](#). It is fine to use jargon in your academic writing, but you should tell your reader what it means (define it).

Avoid abbreviations and contractions, but well-known acronyms are acceptable

Abbreviations such as “e.g.” are too informal to use in academic writing, so write them out in full, like this - “for example”.

Contractions such as “don’t” and “isn’t” should also be written in full, like this - “do not” and “is not”.

Acronyms are abbreviations made up of the first letters of each word of a phrase; for example RAF. It is fine to use acronyms in academic writing, if you follow this rule: the first time you use the phrase in your writing, write it out in full and put the acronym in brackets after it, like this - Royal Air Force (RAF). After that, you can just use the acronym, because you have told your reader what it means.

Be impersonal, unless you are writing about yourself

Avoid using personal pronouns such as “I” and “we”, because they are too informal. Instead, write in the impersonal; for example, “I think that” would become “It has been shown that”.

There are more examples of impersonal writing in the [Varying your writing information sheet](#). The exception is when you are writing about yourself, when it is alright to use “I”.

Do not start a sentence with a conjunction

Conjunctions are linking words in sentences: examples are “and” and “or”. They are not starter words, so do not use them as such.

Think about how you write numbers

In academic writing, there are no set rules as to whether you write numbers as numbers (8) or letters (eight). However, whichever way you decide to do this, do it consistently; for example, use all numbers right the way through your writing.

Be concise

Do not use a lot of words to express your ideas when you could use fewer. Otherwise, you may be accused of “waffling”. There are examples of long pieces of “waffle” translated into fewer words in the [Plain English translations information sheet](#).

Use continuous prose (sentences and paragraphs) in essays, but remember that reports are different

Essays should be written in full sentences. They should normally not contain lists, bullet points or headings. However, it is alright to use these in reports.

Be precise

In your writing, make sure that you say exactly what you mean, and that your words cannot be misinterpreted. The How to be wonderfully imprecise: [some genuine headlines information sheet](#) has some funny examples of writing which says the opposite of what is supposed to say!

Be careful about your choice of words

The language you use in your writing should be unbiased (objective) and unemotional. There are examples of the type of language you should not use in the [Mad dogs and Englishmen - examples of emotive language information sheet](#).

Materials developed by Chris Pinder, University of Hull. © University of Hull, 2008.