



## Decoding Academic Writing

This tipsheet operates under the assumption that you, dear reader, wish to address issues of academic tone within your own writing. In reality, standards for academic tone vary from professor to professor and from class to class, so what's suitable for one professor, one class and one assignment might vary to the next. It never hurts to check!

### Informal Language

- ★ How people speak in day to day life.

### Formal Language

- ★ How people are expected to write in an academic setting.

### Why is academic writing different?

- ★ Academic writing strives to be a universal standard, so everyone can understand.
- ★ Academic writing aims to communicate as clearly as possible without sacrificing substance or meaning.
- ★ Academic writing has its roots in the classist, elite structure of Western academia and continues its legacy.
- ★ This means that everything you say must be unbiased, scholarly, and supported by evidence.

### Contractions

Contractions are ubiquitous in daily conversations, but don't have a place in academic writing. A contraction can often lead to an unclear meaning. Additionally, lack of contractions signals to the reader that this is an academic paper.

Example:

Informal	Formal
She <b>isn't</b> aware that she's surrounded by people she can't trust.	1) She <b>is not</b> aware that she is surrounded by people she cannot trust.  2) She <b>is not</b> aware that untrustworthy individuals surround her.

Contractions are an easy fix – just expand them, e.g. ‘can’t’ into ‘cannot’. Occasionally, expanding contractions reveals awkward wording. In this case, it can be best to reformat the sentence entirely. Be sure to read the sentence aloud afterwards.

### Qualifiers

Words such as ‘a little’, ‘definitely’, ‘maybe’, ‘somewhat’ have a place in verbal arguments and conversations, but they weaken your arguments in academic writing. As academic writing is all about stating your point as clearly as possible, justifying your argument makes it seem like you don’t believe in your own points. Why should a reader trust your argument if you can’t state it simply?

#### If this is in your paper

1) Remember that for the purposes of this paper, you are an expert on the topic and you don’t need to justify your research or arguments. While it may seem mean, blunt or rude to state things plainly, qualifiers are usually a waste of space in writing and reduce expert credibility. Try getting rid of qualifiers entirely, read through the sentences, and only add them back in if they’re absolutely necessary.

### Colloquialisms

Colloquialisms rely on others knowing what the phrases mean. In academic writing, you cannot assume that the reader is from the same cultural background as you; the quicker you can reach effective communication and understanding between the writer and reader the more successful your writing will be.

- ★ However, don’t assume that your writing, language or way of speaking is ‘wrong’. Just as you might speak differently to your professors than to your friends, switching tone is important in papers, but it does not make one form of communication “better” than another.

Examples:

Informal	Formal
This did not look like <b>no place she'd</b> seen before.	This place did not look like <b>anything she had</b> ever seen before.
Lippi-Green gives us the linguistic facts of life to argue that language is not <b>a one size fits all deal</b> .	Lippi-Green offers the five linguistic facts of life as evidence that language is not <b>uniform</b> .

### If this is in your paper...

1) If your professor is commenting on “informal language” or “grammar” a lot, first, meet with the professor in person (office hours are good for this). If they haven't pointed to specific aspects of your language, ask them politely if they can show you what sections they are worried about and explain in more detail. Then, you might want to make regular appointments with a writing consultant or the course's TA to read over all paper drafts with you before you turn them in (preferably out loud); hearing someone else read and explain areas of informality will help you develop your ear for what's appropriate for each professor.

### Rhetorical Questions

Rhetorical questions are powerful tools of rhetoric (hence the name!) and work very well in more casual writing or persuasive speeches. However, questions are weaker than outright statements. “This strategy is ineffective” has a much stronger impact than “Is this really the best strategy?”

### If this is in your paper...

1) Reformat rhetorical questions to statements instead. Rather than having the answer be implicit, include it explicitly in your argument so that there's no room for confusion.

### Personal pronouns / Invoking the reader

Be aware of the audience you're writing for. Some professors have no issue with or encourage the use of 'I' or other personal statements. However, academic writing traditionally eschews use of 'I' or 'you', for a variety of reasons: using 'I' makes the writing more intimate and familiar, using 'you/we' implicates the

reader in possibly inaccurate ways, e.g. ‘You would be surprised to know the depth of the corruption in politics’ is only true if the reader is surprised.

**If this is in your paper...**

- 1) Revise sentences to take out the ‘I’ and make them into simple statements instead, e.g. ‘I think that the fashion of the 1800s was political’, you’d write ‘The fashion of the 1800s was political’.
- 2) Don’t just replace ‘you’ with ‘one’/‘the reader’, e.g. ‘You would be surprised...’ to ‘One would be surprised...’. You’ll see this advice on a lot of writing advice websites, but it’s obvious that the paper is only invoking this mysterious ‘one’ to get around the ‘you’ issue. Instead, take a critical look at the offending sentences: What are you trying to say? Why did you include the audience in the first place? Can you rephrase the sentiment?

**Author’s names**

When introducing an author, use both the first and last name. After that, always use the last name; the full name is unnecessarily long. Using the first name is a sign of familiarity, and also can cause confusion as many people share first names – fewer share last names.

**If this is in your paper...**

- 1) Easy fix: just use last name after introduction.

**Exaggeration / Hyperbole**

Using exaggeration and hyperbole in your writing is no replacement for well-sourced research. Rather than resorting to bombastic phrasing such as ‘White culture is just stealing other people’s culture’, focus on specific, cited, instances, such as ‘The history of colonialism lives on through the appropriation of minority cultures and art by the dominant Western culture’. Hyperbole may sound more dramatic, but it casts your credibility into question.

**If this is in your paper...**

- 1) Find sources for any claims you make that are not common knowledge. It’s perfectly alright to have a strong, dramatic claim; you just need to be able to back it up with a credible source.

2) If your source's wording is strong and effective, considering using a quote instead of paraphrasing so that the original message isn't lost; Quotes are good for supporting arguments, introducing unfamiliar words or concepts, and preserving particular language from a source .

### **Verbosity (Overly Formal)**

While thesauruses can be handy, you shouldn't be using it to replace all of your more common words. Often times a straightforward and simple word is better than a fancy one, as "fancier" words can have specific meanings that may not match what you're trying to say. Additionally, using long, archaic, and formal words can make it harder to read your paper, hiding your actual argument behind flowery language (A flowery example of the previous phrase: "...obfuscating your intended argument in the hollowed, contorted folds of linguistic proliferation." Ugh.).

#### **If this is in your paper...**

1) Read through your paper aloud, preferably to someone else. See if your word choices make sense aloud; would you be confident reading this paper in front of a class? Is your listener able to understand what you mean quickly? If needed, do sentence-level revisions, cutting down sentences until they're as economical as possible.

### **Biased / Lacking Research**

The backbone of any good paper is a strong argument. However, a body's not just a spine, and a paper's not just the argument; a paper needs all the fleshy, supporting bits – the research– to hold it together. In informal discussion people rarely cite their sources in an argument, but in a paper you need to be able to prove that you both know what you're talking about and you're not just making stuff up.

#### **If this is your paper...**

1) Work backwards. Find your main arguments and figure out what sources you would need to prove them, or try to figure out where you learned it / why you believe it in the first place, and use those sources. The reference desk at Hutchins Library is invaluable for finding resources.

2) If you're unable to find any sources for the arguments you're making, it's better to scrap the arguments and reformulate your approach than have a paper based on unfounded research.

## Sources Consulted

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