

Reducing Informality in Academic Writing

Language in academic writing is usually described as formal, concise, precise, and neutral. If these characteristics fail to appear in writing, even the most innovative and intelligent ideas might be perceived as simplistic or even be disregarded by a scholarly community. To avoid this situation, writers should strive for formality in their writing. This handout outlines language features that usually contribute to informality and provides examples of more formal alternatives.

NOTE: It is crucial to remember that the language features described below are NOT completely avoided in all academic writing. Depending on the context, discipline, genre, year of publication, and even section of a paper, these features could appear with varying frequency. Still, they are generally uncommon in academic writing.

	Informal Feature	Possible Substitution
It is uncommon to address the reader in academic writing. Avoid second person pronouns (<i>you/your/yours</i>).	You will find the results in Figure 2.	Results can be found in Figure 2.
Contractions (e.g. <i>don't, he'd, she's</i>) make writing less formal. Use full forms instead.	The study doesn't examine...	The study does not examine...
Generally, questions are not used in scholarly writing (unless it is a research question).	Why has antibiotic resistance increased?	Many studies have investigated why antibiotic resistance has increased.
Avoid exclamations.	...evidence!	...evidence.
Use 1-word verbs instead of 2- or more word verbs (phrasal	This articles talks about ...	This article discusses ...

verbs).	The prices go up ...	The prices increase ...
Avoid unattended <i>this/these</i> ; use <i>this/these</i> + a summary word instead.	Writing instructors know that students need to understand the differences between formal and informal language. This can help students make strategic choices in their writing.	Writing instructors know that students need to understand the differences between formal and informal language. This understanding can help students make strategic choices in their writing.
Limit the use of “run on” expressions, such as: <i>and so on</i> ; <i>etc.</i>	Examples include laptops, smart phones, etc.	Examples include laptops, smart phones, and other devices.
Single-word negatives are more formal.	Not many of the participants saw a change. The study did not show any contradictory findings.	Few participants saw a change. The study showed no contradictory findings.
“There is” and “There are” can usually be cut from the beginning of sentences.	There was little evidence...	Little evidence appeared...
Limit the use of coordinating conjunctions (<i>for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so</i>) at the beginning of sentences.	And the study also compared...	The study also compared...
In many disciplines, writers do not utilize first person (<i>I/me/my/mine</i> or <i>we/our/ours</i>), or they use it sparingly. Avoid first person pronouns unless they are used frequently in your field, in a specific writing genre (e.g. personal reflection) or in a	I can explain this fact by...	This fact can be explained by...

certain part of a paper (e.g. in introductions to state the purpose of research).		
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Passive voice: Although grammar checkers caution against the use of passive voice, it is used in academic writing when the agent of the action is unimportant. Thus, limit, but not completely avoid passive voice in your writing.

Word Choice

In addition to the language features listed above, it is important to be mindful of general word choice as well. The following verbs, nouns, adjectives, and adverbs might be too general or vague, so usually more specific alternatives are preferred.

Informal Words	Possible Substitutions
Verbs get make put let look say	collect, gain produce, construct place, locate allow, permit appear, seem discuss, explain, suggest
Nouns thing(s), stuff kid(s) people	<i>use a word more specific to the context</i> child(ren), daughter(s), son(s) experts, students, participants, or <i>any other specific word</i>

Adjectives & Adverbs

sort of	rather, somewhat
like	such as, for example
very/really/so	<i>omit and use a stronger adjective/adverb</i>
lots/a lot of	a great number/amount of, a variety of
big	substantial, significant
good	positive, considerable, high-quality
bad	negative, unhealthy
done	finished, completed
nice	personable, helpful
beautiful	<i>use attractive to describe a person or use an adjective more specific to the situation to describe other nouns (e.g. I want to use more <u>effective</u> words – not <u>beautiful</u> words)</i>

A chart of formal and informal verbs

<i>informal</i>	<i>formal</i>	<i>informal</i>	<i>formal</i>
seem	appear	whole	complete
climb	ascend	wrong	incorrect
help	assist	worse	Inferior
stop	cease	dim	Indistinct
begin	commence	enough	sufficient
use	consume	better	superior
shorten	decrease	clear	transparent
show	demonstrate	understanding	comprehension
go	depart	lack	deficiency
want	desire	chance	opportunity
ask	enquire	in charge	responsibility
end	finish	lucky	fortunate
tell	inform	sight	vision
get	obtain	in the end	finally
keep	preserve	at once	immediately
say no	reject	at first	initially
free	release	on and off	intermittently
mend	repair	mainly	principally
need	require	next	subsequently
live	reside	so	therefore
keep	retain		

Phrasal Verbs / Two word verb forms / Multi-word verbs

A verb + preposition are often considered informal

Examples of these are put off / look into / come across – there is usually a formal alternative;

put off: *alternative more formal synonyms: postpone*

look into: *alternative more formal synonyms: investigate*

come across: *alternative more formal synonyms: discover*

Colloquial / informal words expressions

Beware of using slang, and general English terms

Examples of informal / colloquial words are gonna / stuff / a lot of / things /

Stuff: *alternative more formal synonyms:*

effects, equipment, gear, goods, individual, kit, luggage, objects, paraphernalia, possessions, substances.

A lot of: *alternative more formal synonyms:*

abundant, adequate, considerable, plentiful, sizeable, substantial, sufficient, significant.

Things: *alternative more formal synonyms:*

aspects, areas, elements, facts, figures, materials, points, situations, subjects, information