

In most university assignments you need to write in an academic style. The notes below describe some aspects of academic style. You should note, however, that there is no 'recipe' for writing a perfect assignment. Writing is an intensely personal activity and everyone develops his or her own approach. That fact notwithstanding, there are some broadly accepted ways to write academically.

## What is academic style?

There is no definitive answer to this question, but we can perhaps identify five technical qualities that make a piece of writing 'academic':

**F**ormal  
**O**thers  
**C**autious  
**S**uccinct  
**I**mpersonal



FOCSI (well, kind of)

Academic writing is **formal**. You should not use 'casual' language in your assignments – words like 'stuff', 'really' and 'things' and phrases like 'a bit' and 'sort of' (there are lots of others). Sentence fragments that are perfectly acceptable in everyday speech – such as 'Not at all.' and 'Which he didn't.' – must be avoided in writing. You should not use abbreviations such as 'e.g.', 'i.e.' and especially 'etc.' (lecturers really hate 'etc.').

Academic writing normally builds on what **others** have previously done and thought about your subject. This means reading and thinking about what others – practitioners and theorists – have written, and using their ideas in your writing through accurate **quotation** and **citation**. Your ideas should be based not only on what you know and think but also on what others have thought and done. You are part of an ongoing community of learning.

Academic writing is often rather **cautious**. (This is because academic *thinking* is rather cautious.) Beware of words like 'should', 'ought' and 'must', and think carefully before using words like 'definite(ly)'. Academic work is open-minded and enquiring; as a student you should generally *wonder* about things rather than being *certain*. Words like 'possibly', 'probably', 'likely', 'seems', 'may' and 'could' tend to feature in good academic writing.

Academic writing is **succinct**. Reading some books and journals might make you think that academic writing should be complex and long-winded, but in fact the opposite is true. Readers of your assignments need to understand exactly what you mean, and in as few words as possible. When re-reading what you've written you should always check that you have been as *precise* and *concise* as possible.

Academic writing is usually **impersonal**. In essays in particular, you cannot normally write in the first person, so you cannot use 'I', 'my' or 'me' (first person singular) or 'we', 'our' or 'us' (first person plural). So instead of writing 'I am surprised that...' you might write 'It is surprising that...'.

In some types of assignment you can write in the first person where it is necessary, especially if you are **reporting** your actions (for example, 'I observed a group of...') or **reflecting** (for example, 'I have learned that...').

Check your course or unit handbook to find out when, if ever, you can use the first person.

## Examples – spot the difference!



There's a lot of arguing about the Spinnaker. Because it's so tall you can see it from all around, but does this mean it's a good thing for the economy etc? It's really late – it was meant to be ready for the Millennium (so much for the 'Millennium Tower', it's just been costing us money all that time too!) – and it's not going to employ as many people as lost their jobs in the dockyard over the years. Not nearly as many. And it'll take ages for them to get back the cost from people who go up it.

But it isn't all bad news...



Portsmouth's Spinnaker Tower is a controversial structure. At 170m (Colville, 2005, p.3), it dominates the city's harbourside. Whether it will boost the city's economy is perhaps questionable, however. The project, and thus its potential impact, has been delayed several times (Dyckhoff, 2005, p. 14). Thirty thousand Portsmouth jobs have been lost since the early 1980s (Merrick, 2005, p. 3); Gunwharf Quays, where the Tower is situated, employed only two thousand in 2001 (Morrison, 2001, p. 1). It may take twenty-five years for income from visitors to equal the cost of construction (Dyckhoff, 2005, p. 15).

Indirectly, however, the Tower may have a much more positive impact...

Remember...



...'FOCSI' writing equals better marks!