

## 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> ).	<b>You</b> 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 <b>doesn't</b> examine...	The study <b>does not</b> 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 verbs).	This articles <b>talks about</b> ... The prices <b>go up</b> ...	This article <b>discusses</b> ... The prices <b>increase</b> ...
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. <b>This</b> can help students make strategic choices in their writing.	Writing instructors know that students need to understand the differences between formal and informal language. <b>This understanding</b> can help students make strategic choices in their writing.
Limit the use of "run on" expressions, such as: <i>and so on; etc.</i>	Examples include laptops, smart phones, <b>etc.</b>	Examples include laptops, smart phones, and <b>other devices</b> .
Single-word negatives are more formal.	<b>Not many of the</b> participants saw a change. The study <b>did not</b> show <b>any</b> contradictory findings.	<b>Few</b> participants saw a change. The study showed <b>no</b> contradictory findings.

“There is” and “There are” can usually be cut from the beginning of sentences.	<b>There was</b> 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.	<b>And</b> 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 certain part of a paper (e.g. in introductions to state the purpose of research).	<b>I</b> can explain this fact by...	This fact can be explained by...

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

### Strategies

- When you edit your paper electronically, enter the informal word (e.g. stuff) in your word processor's search box to identify all the instances of this word in your text. Use a formal alternative to replace the informal word, but try to use a variety of formal words, not the same one in every example.
- To identify whether a certain word is commonly used in academic writing, search for this word in COCA Word and Phrase (<https://www.wordandphrase.info/frequencyList.asp>). Click on the word for context and synonyms, and a box below will show you a graph that displays the word frequency in different contexts (e.g. in spoken language, magazines, fiction, and academic writing). If the graph shows that this word is infrequent in academic writing, it is a good idea to look for synonyms (also provided on this website).
- Another place to look for synonyms is in online dictionaries (e.g. <http://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/us/> or <https://www.wordsmyth.net/>).

### Practice

Identify informal features in the following sentences. Underline informal words and phrases and offer more formal alternatives.

1. Researchers have found out that this drug has serious side effects.
2. Engineers can come up with better designs using CAD.
3. Researchers have been looking into this problem for 15 years now.
4. The emission levels have been going up and down.
5. The government has made good progress in solving environmental problems.
6. We got encouraging results.
7. The results of a lot of different projects have been pretty good.
8. A loss of jobs is one of the things that will happen if the process is automated.
9. The reaction of the officials was sort of negative.
10. The economic outlook is mighty nice.
11. If you fail the exam, you can't enter the university.
12. OK, what are the causes of deformation? Many possibilities exist.
13. You can clearly see the difference between these two processes.
14. These special tax laws have been enacted in six states: Illinois, Iowa, Ohio, etc.
15. The subjects didn't have much difficulty with the task.

Information and a practice exercise in this handout are adapted from Swales, J. M., & Feak, C. B. (2004). *Academic writing for graduate students: Essential tasks and skills*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press. – pp.22-25

*Last updated 11/2/2017*