

Formal Academic Writing At University

1. Do not use contractions

Contractions, such as “don’t”, “can’t” and “won’t”, are words formed from two abbreviated words. In formal writing, you should always write the words in full.

2. Do not use colloquial vocabulary

Colloquial vocabulary is the type of language that is used in everyday conversation – which means that it is informal. Academic writing should always be formal. These are some examples of expressions that you should avoid, together with their formal alternative:

Informal

figure out
check up
find out
I will try and research
loads of research
a lot of
for sure

Formal Alternative

deduce
investigate
discover
I will try to explain
extensive research
many / much
I am sure / certain

You should also avoid other types of informal English such as figures of speech; these include metaphors, similes, hyperbole, clichés and idioms. Some examples of these include:

The mind is an ocean (metaphor)
The mind is like an ocean (simile)
Thousands of tests (hyperbole)
No pain, no gain (cliché)
It is now all water under the bridge (idiom)

In addition, you should also avoid using all forms of the verb get; these also belong to colloquial language and so have no place in formal academic writing.

3. Avoid using run-on expressions

Run-on expressions include phrases such as: and so forth, and so on and etc. Instead of using these expressions, you should write the sentence as a complete statement:

Informal

Some examples of citation styles include APA, IEEE, Chicago Manual of Style, Harvard, MLA, etc.

Formal Alternative

Some examples of citation styles include APA, IEEE, Chicago Manual of Style, Harvard, and MLA.

4. Avoid repetition

The vocabulary of the English language is wide. Good writers demonstrate their skills by avoiding the use of the same word; one alternative is to apply synonyms.

5. Do not use rhetorical questions

A rhetorical question is a question for which no answer is expected; the writer assumes the reader knows the answer or goes on to answer the question in the text. These kinds of “questions” are inappropriate for academic writing; readers might not know the answer and the point being made could be more strongly and clearly expressed as a statement. For example:

Informal

What do we mean by “stalking”? It has been defined as “a long-term commitment to engaging in persistent campaigns of harassment that have ...

Formal Alternative

McEwan et al. (2000) define stalking as “a long-term commitment to engaging in persistent campaigns of harassment that have the potential to cause immense ...”

Notice that you can change a rhetorical question into a statement and still use it effectively in an assignment.

6. Place adverbs within the verb

In informal English, adverbs are usually placed at the beginning or end of sentences. However, in academic writing, they should be placed within the verb group, as seen in the examples below:

Informal

Then the paper will discuss ...
The media presents the nursing profession in a negative way generally.

Formal Alternative

The paper will then discuss ...
The media generally presents the nursing profession in a negative way.

7. Make sure you avoid redundancy

Redundancy refers to padding out your writing by using words that have the same meaning. Some examples of this include:

Ontario Tech University is known and recognised as a diverse learning community.
The paper revealed a lack of adequate knowledge.
The result of the research was both limited and confined.

8. Avoid starting a sentence with a coordinating conjunction

Do not start a sentence with a coordinating conjunction such as for, and, nor, but, or, yet, and so (also known as fanboys). Because they are meant to join words, phrases and clauses, these conjunctions should not come at the beginning of a sentence in formal or academic writing. However, the following transitional adverbs, as appropriate, can be used instead at the beginning of sentences:

additionally, moreover, nevertheless, however, therefore thus alternatively

Adapted from <http://unilearning.uow.edu.au/academic/2e>.

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