Academic writing requires a level of clarity and precision that makes repeated editing essential. This brochure describes some aspects of good writing style and will give you practice at editing sentences to improve their style.

TONE

Academic writing sounds different to more casual writing because it:

- is usually impersonal and unemotional
- uses precise vocabulary and complicated nouns
- uses passive voice more often than informal writing does
- often has longer sentences than informal writing does

Note: Academic writing usually avoids the pronouns 'I' and 'we', but some disciplines allow more personal language than others, e.g. in introductions and conclusions but not in the body of papers. It is a good idea to check what is expected in your specific context.

Academic Writing:

Research has shown a relationship between vitamin A and cancer, but the exact nature of the connection has yet to be determined.

Informal Writing:

We believe vitamin A and cancer may be linked, but we haven't worked out exactly what it is yet.

PRACTICE

1. Rewrite these sentences without personal pronouns.
   a) When we study coal production, we find these figures.
   b) With this evidence I have proved my hypothesis that reading out loud is an effective editing strategy.

Precise vocabulary:

- a relationship
- the exact nature of the connection

Complicated nouns:

- a relationship between vitamin A and cancer

Vague words:

- a link
- exactly what it is

Precise vocabulary:

- vitamin A and cancer may have a link

PRACTICE

2. Rewrite these sentences as nouns (things) in the new sentences:
   a) She spoke recently about poverty. → ________________________was thought provoking.
   b) The patient recovered quickly. →______________________surprised the doctor.

Note: Academic writing only uses complicated vocabulary to make meaning clearer, not to sound more important. (see section on Improving Clarity.)

Passive voice: ...has been determined

Active voice: ...haven't worked out

Note: Academic writing does not always use passive voice. Like informal writing, it uses active voice when the actor doing an action is important. However, in academic writing passive voice is more frequent because the person or thing doing an action is often irrelevant – it is the action itself that is important.

IMPROVING CONCISENESS

Some academic writing is unnecessarily complicated, but good academic writing is as simple and as short as possible. To make your writing more concise:

- choose short words or phrases rather than long ones
- delete unnecessary words
- shorten wordy constructions
Use short words/phrases whenever they are specific enough for your meaning. Use long words / phrases only if there is no shorter way to express the same meaning.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No unnecessary words</th>
<th>Meaningless phrases:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fast driving is dangerous</td>
<td>In my opinion, fast driving is dangerous.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X is Y</td>
<td>It was found that X is Y.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X is Y</td>
<td>What I want to make clear is that X is Y.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X is Y</td>
<td>The fact of the matter is that X is Y.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X is Y</td>
<td>All things being equal, X is Y.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X should do Y</td>
<td>It is recommended that X should do Y.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X is Y</td>
<td>At the end of the day, X is Y.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Check your writing for words that you can delete without changing the meaning.

Shorter version:

- Smoking may cause cancer.
- Vitamin A and cancer are linked.
- It is hard to determine who should be considered needy.

Longer construction:

- It is possible that smoking causes cancer.
- There is a link between vitamin A and cancer.
- The question of who is to be considered needy is hard to answer.

Shorter active version:

- The partners broke the agreement.
- The department needs data so it can determine how to timely basis when weather conditions change.
- Policy makers have not considered how free chloride or other gases might cause health hazards to personnel.

Unnecessary passive:

- The agreement was broken by the partners.
- Data is needed so that a determination of redirection is permitted on a redirect resources when weather conditions change.
- The ways free chloride or other gases might cause health hazards to personnel has not been considered by the policy makers.
Look for complicated constructions in your writing and, whenever possible, rewrite them more simply.

**PRACTICE**

3. Choose a short word from the list to replace the underlined word or phrase in each sentence:

```
• about • during • help • change • because
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a) The subject’s illness caused a variation in mood.
b) I would be happy to facilitate the group.
c) In view of the fact that the budget is limited, applications for funding must be considered carefully.
d) The presentation with regard to management styles was very entertaining.
e) In the course of my scholarship, I hope to travel to Uluru.

4. Delete any unnecessary words in these sentences.

a) It should be noted that this behaviour can be unlearnt.
b) The floods in the Philippines were a serious crisis.
c) As a matter of fact, Liao agrees with Dominquez.
d) Immunisation programs do not completely eliminate diseases.
e) An equitable solution is not impossible.

5. Rewrite these sentences using shorter constructions.

a) The committee has no expectation that it will meet the deadlines.
b) A system must be established by the department so that data on weather conditions and fuel consumption may be gathered on a regular basis.
c) A review was done of the regulations.
d) It is possible that the driver braked too late.

**IMPROVING CLARITY**

Some academic writing is unnecessarily abstract or vague, but good academic writing chooses words carefully to make meaning clear. Even if your grammar is perfect, if you use the wrong words people will not understand your writing. To make your writing as clear as possible, choose words for their exact meaning and rewrite any sentences that could be misinterpreted.

**Clear meaning:**

- Store managers will meet next month to plan an approach to store management.

**Can be misinterpreted:**

- A group in the future will discuss options for store management style improvement.

**Meaningful words:**

- Store managers, next month, plan
- Nguyen’s results were surprising / unusual / enlightening
- High quality / well behaved
- Arrive / attend / approach
- Custom / technique / route

**Vague words:**

- A group in the future will discuss options for store management style improvement.
- Nguyen’s results were interesting.
- good
- come
- way
## Clearer words:
- The teacher showed the new book to the class.
- The technician demonstrated how to operate the spectrophotometer.
- The model removed his coat to reveal an elegant dinner suit.
- She exhibited the mineral specimens at the conference.

## Words don’t match context:
- The teacher demonstrated the new book to the class.
- The technician revealed how to operate the spectrophotometer.
- The model removed his coat to exhibit an elegant dinner suit.
- She showed the mineral specimens at the conference.

Use a thesaurus to look for words, but check for example sentences in a dictionary to see which word best matches your meaning and context.

### Clear meaning:
- In the future, a group will discuss management styles.
- I have talked with my colleagues about stocking the zoo.
- An old piano with bow legs is wanted by an experienced man.
- A very young Humphrey Bogart stars in *Casablanca*, my favourite movie, which has recently been translated into Swahili.

### Confusing order of ideas:
- A group in the future will discuss management styles.
- I have talked about stocking the zoo with my colleagues.
- An old piano is wanted by an experienced man with bow legs.
- My favourite movie, *Casablanca*, starring a very young Humphrey Bogart, has recently been translated into Swahili.

### Clear meaning:
- a new approach to management

### Confusing compound nouns:
- store management style improvement

### Misdiagnosis of disordered thought in early childhood is a problem.
- Early childhood thought disorder misdiagnosis is a problem.

### Practice

6. Replace the crossed-out words in these sentences with words that are clearer or more meaningful. (Hints: carefully, claim, public, stages, writing)
   
   a) Accountants should write letters well ___________
   
   b) There are many things ___________ involved in doing _________ an assignment.
   
   c) Andersen was the first to maintain ___________ that metal could be refined using electricity.
   
   d) The populations ___________ often doesn't know what their local politician is doing.

7. Rearrange these sentences putting related ideas close together:
   
   a) He has given many lectures on controlling the flow of gases to engineers.
   
   *Rearranged:* …………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………

   b) Peace, beyond the experience of many people in the world, living in war-torn countries, is a luxury.
   
   *Rearranged:* …………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………

8. Rewrite these compound nouns to make them easier to read:

   a) The university has a new international student skills program.
   
   *Rearranged:* …………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………

   b) Further research should investigate medication maintenance level evaluation procedures.
   
   *Rearranged:* …………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………
IMPROVING FOCUS

Some academic writing goes around in circles. Good academic writing gets straight to the point. To make writing as focused as possible, carefully choose which ideas are most important in the following sentences and make those ideas main subjects and verbs:

Focused sentences:

The gun lobbyists were successful in preventing the legislature from Senator Smith’s gun control bill.

Senator Smith introduced a gun control bill, though the strong gun lobby prevented its passage.

Unfocused sentences:

Gun lobbyists’ prevention of bill passing

Smith’s introduction of bill lobby

According to a recent study, pedestrians passing on a crowded street will give more space to a woman than to a man.

Pedestrians passing on a crowded street will give more space to a woman than to a man. This was shown in a recent study.

I have been studying the effects of crowding on the behaviour of mice.

I have been studying mice and the effects of crowding on their behaviour.

We describe these regulations in the next section. They will be implemented without increasing manpower or tribunal expenditure.

These regulations, which are intended for implementation without requiring police authorities to increase manpower or expenditure although there may be some modest increases in expenditure by the police tribunal, are described in the next section.

PRACTICE

9. Combine or rewrite these sentences to make them more focused:

a) The tapestries were hanging on the wall. They were abstract yet beautiful.

b) Officers appointed to permanent commissions who do not possess the qualifications for voluntary insurance explained in the preceding paragraphs and offices appointed to emergency commissions direct from government or business positions who were not already insured at the date of appointment may be eligible.

Some information in this brochure was adapted from:

University of Guelph 1990, Fast fax: improving your style, Learning Resource Centre pamphlet.
Winckel, A & Hart, B 1996, Report writing style guide for engineering students, Faculty of Engineering & the Flexible Learning Centre, University of South Australia, The Levels.
**SUGGESTED ANSWERS**

(Note: most questions have more than one correct answer)

1. a) Studies of coal production reveal these figures.  
b) This evidence proves the hypothesis that reading out loud is an effective editing strategy.

2. a) Her recent speech about poverty was thought provoking.  
b) The patient’s quick recovery surprised his doctor.

3. a) The subject’s illness caused a change in mood.  
b) I would be happy to help the group.  
c) Because the budget is limited, applications for funding must be considered carefully.  
d) The presentation about management styles was very entertaining.  
e) During my scholarship, I hope to travel to Uluru.

4. a) This behaviour can be unlearnt.  
b) The floods in the Philippines were a crisis.  
c) Liao agrees with Dominquez.  
d) Immunisation programs do not eliminate diseases.  
e) An equitable solution is possible.

5. a) The committee does not expect to meet the deadline.  
b) The department must establish a system to gather data on weather conditions and fuel consumption on a regular basis.  
c) The regulations were reviewed.  
d) The driver might have braked too late.

6. a) Accountants should write letters carefully.  
b) There are many skills involved in writing an assignment.  
c) Andersen was the first to claim that metal could be refined using electricity.  
d) The public often doesn’t know what their local politician is doing.

7. a) He has given many lectures to engineers on controlling the flow of gases.  
b) Peace is a luxury, beyond the experience of many people in the world living in war-torn countries.

8. a) The university has a new skills program for international students.  
b) Further research should investigate procedures to evaluate maintenance levels for medication.

9. a) The tapestries hanging on the wall were abstract yet beautiful.  
b) The qualifications for voluntary insurance were explained in the preceding paragraphs. There may be exemptions for officers with permanent commissions and uninsured officers transferring from government or business to emergency positions.