

Vocabulary in academic writing

Achieving the right tone and style

Using the right vocabulary to attain the right tone and style in academic writing helps to identify you in the eyes of your readers as a member of your particular discourse community.

The verbs, nouns, adjectives, and adverbs used in academic writing are selected to convey formality and so differ from those that would be used in conversation; for example, the verb in (1) below falls within the register for academic writing but that used in (2) does not:

1. In this essay, I will *suggest* some possible solutions to the problems posed by pollution.
2. In this essay, I will *come up with* some possible solutions to the problems posed by pollution.

Generally speaking, single-word formal verbs — rather than multi-word verbs — are used in academic writing. There are two notable exceptions to this useful rule of thumb, however: *set out* and *carry out*; for example:

- This essay *sets out* some possible solutions to the problems posed by pollution.
- He *carried out* a number of important experiments last year.

But achieving appropriate style depends not only on selecting the right verbs — nouns, adjectives, and adverbs also need to be well chosen. Look at the pair of sentences below:

1. The results of the experiment were *fantastic*.
2. The results of the experiment were *very satisfactory*.

Quantifiers have to be selected carefully, too. Consider this pair of sentences, where 1 is too informal:

1. He carried out *a lot* of research into cancer.
2. He carried out *a great deal of* research into cancer.

Negative quantifiers have to be used very carefully in academic writing. In the pairs of sentences below, the second one is the preferred option in academic writing.

1. *Not many* students obtain a first class degree.
 2. *Few* students obtain a first class degree.
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1. There is *hardly anything* that can be done to reduce unemployment in the short term.
 2. There is *little* that can be done to reduce unemployment in the short term.
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1. It was observed that many students *do not do any* physical exercise at all.
 2. It was observed that many students *do no* physical exercise at all.

Avoiding abbreviations

Abbreviations (often called ‘contractions’ in speech), for example, *didn’t*, *wouldn’t*, *we’ll* and the like are not normally used in academic writing. The full form is preferred, as shown in the brackets in these examples:

1. In this essay, I’ll (I will) discuss the topic of how cultural background might affect learning style.
2. In conclusion, I can’t (cannot) claim to have answered all the points raised by the question.

Avoiding direct questions

Rhetorical questions are sometimes used in academic writing for effect rather than to elicit responses and can be effective devices but generally speaking academic writing prefers the use of straightforward statements — as in the second sentences below:

1. What factors influence a student’s learning style?
 2. A number of factors influence a student’s learning style.
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1. Did you know that cultural background can influence a student’s learning style?
 2. It is generally accepted that cultural background can influence a student’s learning style.

Activity 1

Choose the best replacement word or phrase from the box below for each of the underlined items in the sentences. Note that you may need to change the form of some replacements. Follow the example in the first sentence.

carry out, analyze, discuss, fluctuate, submit, excellent, eliminate, wildly, decrease, a great deal of, obtain, considerably, key factors, suggest, essential, discover, in recent years

1. He did (carried out) a lot of (a great deal of) research into pollution.
2. She got () her PhD degree in 1999.
3. One of the top features () in good academic writing is appropriate choice of words, which can help students turn in () really great () assignments.
4. Working hard is a must () for university students.
5. The cost of computers has gone down () a lot () lately ().
6. Students can get rid of () errors in their writing by proofreading carefully.
7. Scientists have recently come up with () ways of making plastic biodegradable.
8. Prices of books have gone up and down () like crazy () over the past five years.
9. In this essay, you are advised to talk about () the ways in which cultural background can affect a student's approach to learning.
10. The professor wanted her students to break down () the problems before giving () possible solutions to them.

Verb versus noun expression

It is common in academic writing to prefer noun-based expressions. They are preferred because they depersonalize the writing and achieve an objective tone. Such expressions are called nominalizations, and they may make sentences longer and sometimes more difficult to understand. Look at the pairs of sentences below, where the second sentence is the nominalization.

1. If students *develop* particular study skills, they can *enhance their performance*.
 2. *The development of* particular study skills can *lead to enhanced student performance*.
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1. Every day shops *lose* thousands of valuable items of stock, and this affects us all *because prices increase*.
 2. *The daily loss of* thousands of valuable items of stock affects us all *through an increase in prices*.
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1. When the author *analyzed* our data, he did not *cite* any sources that would *support* his criticism of our argument.
 2. *The author's analysis of* our data *omits any citation of* sources that would *provide support for* his criticism of our argument.

Activity 2

Change these verbal sentences into nominalizations.

1. Students were widely involved in radical politics on European campuses in the 1960s.
2. The teacher performed poorly and was widely criticized by students.
3. Most people are able to retain eight digits in short-term memory and this is why telephone numbers are mostly eight digits.
4. Humans destabilize ecosystems.
5. The police investigated the matter

Activity 3

Read the text below and identify where formal negatives and appropriate vocabulary can replace less appropriate language. You should also change any questions into statements and eliminate contractions.

The effects of cultural background on learning style

It is generally accepted that cultures have a lot of values and customs and that these are passed from one generation to another by the family and by the education system. But what are the effects of cultural background on learning style? First, I want to talk about the differences between Western and Chinese learning styles. I then come up with links between these styles and cultural background. In the final section of the essay, I say something about the effects students' learning styles might have if they go to study in a different culture.

Western cultures tend to emphasize the importance of the individual. What are the particular effects of this in educational terms? It means that students are encouraged to interact with their peers and express opinions openly. Chinese students, by contrast, are quieter but this doesn't necessarily mean that they are learning passively. It's simply that in Chinese culture, it's not considered a good thing to talk too much or question the teacher. The effect of these basic differences is that Chinese students achieve really great examination grades compared to Western students but may not develop their oral argumentation skills.

Collocations

A collocation is formed when certain words are frequently found together. You can see in the text below that the underlined pairs of words are common collocations in academic writing.

Mable reported that the questionnaire survey conducted between September 25 and October 10 had been completed thanks to the hard work of all the team members, the assistance of Andrew, and the kind help rendered by colleagues in the Department.

The 500 questionnaires were administered by academic staff. Several problems were encountered in the questionnaire survey, however, and it was agreed that new practices should be adopted to cope with the problems. A key issue to investigate thoroughly will be the time needed by respondents to complete the questionnaire.

Collocations may be verb-noun combinations:

1. express an opinion
2. hold a meeting
3. deliver a presentation
4. formulate a response
5. avoid plagiarism

They may be adjective-noun combinations:

1. key issue
2. extensive reading
3. concrete evidence
4. term paper
5. balanced argument

They may take the form of a prepositional phrase:

1. Maria and David are on the way to the office in Church Street.
2. Let's meet at my place and then go to the talk on investment opportunities.
3. Mark's career at ABC Investment Corp. is in ruins following the investigation.
4. Mark's career in the investment industry is now at an end.
5. Peter's job is *in doubt* following his poor performance at the conference.

Activity 4

Write *of, in, to, about, for, by, with* or *from* in the gaps.

1. The report was written ____ Peter, ____ some help from Mark.
2. The Chair asked committee members to account ____ Mary's absence ____ the meeting.
- 3 After recovering ____ serious illness, people often live in fear ____ future health problems.
4. Students need to prepare ____ the course carefully as it consists ____ several parts.
5. Mary was not happy ____ being prevented ____ applying for promotion.

Common vocabulary errors

A very common error is to use *about* after *discuss* (discuss about), and to use *on* after *stress* or *emphasize* (emphasize on). There should be no collocation here i.e. no preposition is needed in these cases. Another common error is the incorrect use of plurals e.g. I really need to expand my vocabularies (vocabulary) to up-grade my English.

Activity 5

1. I bought new softwares for my computer yesterday.
2. There are a number of similarity between computing and business courses.
3. She's been absent for many times.
4. Both of the applicants are not suitable.
5. The article stressed strongly on the need for conservation.
6. He finished speaking and requested for questions from the audience.
7. The plan emphasized on group cooperation.
8. I want to discuss about the possibility of going abroad next year.