



Characteristics of Formal Academic Writing

Use specific language

Use of specific terms, in place of general ones, will make more of an impact upon the reader by providing him or her with more information.

Ex: "Book" is a general term, while "The Scarlet Letter, by Nathaniel Hawthorne" is more specific.

Use of more physically concrete language, which appeals more directly to the senses, should replace vague, abstract terms, which have a debatable definition. The reader will get a clearer understanding.

Ex: "The scenery was beautiful." This is a more abstract phrase because the exact definition of beauty will vary from person to person. Therefore, qualities specifically defining the writer's concept of beauty should be used along with or instead of the vague term. Try instead, "The bright green grass and the clear blue afternoon sky made us thankful to be outdoors."

Avoid cliches

Because cliches are phrases that are commonly used, to the point of overuse, they tend to make your paper sound less original. Try, instead, to think of a new way to say something, or leave the phrase out.

*Ex: He took to it like a duck to water. Try instead, "He accomplished the task with little effort."
The chances are few and far between. Try instead, "The chances are very rare."
His grandfather was as blind as a bat. Try instead, "His grandfather had a severe vision problem."
It was as easy as could be. Try instead, "It was extremely easy."*

These are just some examples of cliches. In general, remember that if you've heard a phrase all your lifetime, your professor probably has too, so change it.

Use 3rd person

First person is "I," or "we"; second person is "you," and third person is "he," "she," "one," or "they." Academic writing, unless stated otherwise by your professor, should always be in the third person.

Choose active over passive voice

Active voice usually uses fewer words, and emphasizes the doer of the action, thus making the writing clearer and more lively for the audience. For example, "He gave the paper to me" is an active sentence. Passive voice puts the receiver of the action first, and then either puts the doer of the action after the verb, or does not name the doer at all. Passive voice should only be used if the doer of the action is unimportant, or unknown. To say it another way, with active voice, the subject of the sentence acts, but in passive voice, the subject is acted upon. For example, "The paper was given to me by him."

- **Avoid euphemisms; be straightforward.**
Euphemisms are "nice" words that are used in the place of certain realistic words.

Ex: His cousin "passed away," Instead write: His cousin died.

- **Replace "neologisms" (new words which have not been widely accepted in formal language throughout society) with more commonly accepted words.**

Ex: He is a "player." Instead write: He is a philanderer.

- **Avoid slang and colloquialisms.**

Ex: " Y'all" come with us. Instead write: All of you come with us.

- **Avoid unnecessary "buzzwords" which add no meaning to a sentence.**

Ex: She was only interested in the "bottom line." Instead write: She was only interested in the profits.

- **Replace expletives ("there" or "it" followed by a form of the verb "to be," used to begin a clause or sentence) with specific, active verbs.**

Ex: It was on Monday that she called. Instead write: She called on Monday.

- **Avoid an informal tone. Keep a more formal emotional distance between the writer and the subject, as well as appropriate emotional distance between the writer and his or her audience.**

Ex: The candidate is a "guy" with "lots of possibilities." Instead write: The candidate is a graduate of Harvard who has worked to bring needed help to the homeless in Washington.