Academic style: tone, diction, etc.

Formal, but not fancy

When you write for college, in most cases you will be expected to use *academic style.* **Here is an excellent explanation,** from Monash University (Melbourne, Australia):

> The language used at [college and] university has various features which distinguish it from the language styles used in other contexts. Consider the language used in novels, conversation, newspapers or law courts. Each has its own style, with varying degrees of formality and objectivity.
>
> Academic language is
> - formal
> - objective
> - impersonal.
>
> These features ensure that ideas and arguments are communicated in a clear, convincing and professional manner.

What does it mean to write in "academic style"?

To write in academic style, use **academic diction** (word choice), including appropriate **person,** and avoid **colloquial expressions, rhetorical questions,** and **excessive contractions.** See below for help with each.

Use academic diction.

"Diction" refers to word choice. Academic diction
- is **precise,** including specialized language when appropriate: avoids hazy or general wording
- is c**oncise**: is simple and clear; avoids "ten dollar words"
- **avoids colloquial language** (conversational, informal language (including slang expressions)
- uses **objective,** not subjective language: avoids expressing the writer's personal opinions or emotional reactions

Use appropriate *person*.

Typically, academic essays should be written **in the third person** (unless an assignment requires you to talk about yourself, of course).

Search for and edit any references that are in the *first person* **or** *second person* **so that they are in the** *third person.*

First person	= I, me, mine, we, us
Second person	= you, yours
Third person	**= he/she/they, them, theirs**

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Important tip: American English speakers use "you" to mean "one" or "someone" or "anyone," and it's very easy to miss it when editing.

To be sure all second person references are caught and edited out, do a word search–"Control/ Command + F"–for "you" in your writing!

Edit out first person (I, me, my, mine, we, our)

Original:

I interpret this as meaning that nature has been destroyed by human development.

Edited:

~~I interpret~~ this ~~as meaning~~ **means** that nature has been destroyed by human development.

⤳ **This means that nature has been destroyed by human development.**

Original:

It strongly suggests that development has damaged nature and that we are responsible for how that damage affects our lives.

Edited:

It strongly suggests that development has damaged nature and that ~~we~~ **humans** are responsible for how that damage affects ~~our~~ **their** lives.

⤳ **It strongly suggests that development has damaged nature and that humans are responsible for how that damage affects their lives.**

Edit out second person (you, yours, yourself)

Original:

Ard (2005) describes a situation in New Jersey where a landfill was so filled with garbage that you could see it from a major road in New Jersey.

Edited:

Ard (2005) describes a situation in New Jersey where a landfill was so filled with garbage that ~~you could see~~ it **could be seen** from a major road in New Jersey.

⤳ **Ard (2005) describes a situation in New Jersey where a landfill was so filled with garbage it could be seen from a major road in New Jersey.**

Avoid colloquial [and clichéd] language

Colloquial language is informal, casual, or slangy. Here's advice from the Duke University Writing Program:

Unless a writing assignment explicitly states that a conversational tone is appropriate, write using more formal language.

Original: It was so noisy, I couldn't hear myself think.
Edited: **The noise made concentrating difficult.**

Original: Group work can be problematic because a chain is only as strong as its weakest link.
Edited: **Group work can be problematic when not everyone contributes equally, causing the project's quality to suffer.**

Original: I worked hard on the assignment because I didn't want to screw up.
Edited: **I worked diligently on the assignment because I wanted to succeed.**

Avoid using rhetorical questions

Academic writing is strongest when it avoids rhetorical questions. A "rhetorical question" is **a question whose answer is either *obvious* or *assumed*.** These weaken writing when they serve as placeholders for assertive statements and when they make assumptions the writer should not make.

Here's help from the University of Wollongong (Australia):

Informal (includes rhetorical question)	Formal
Industrial sites cause vast amounts of environmental pollution, so why do we still use them?	The question surrounding the continued use of industrial sites, given their vast pollution production, still remains.
What is a team? A team can be one person but will usually end up including many more.	A team can include one person but usually involves many more.
The question is, however, does the "Design School Model" provide a practical solution to the problem of how to formulate strategy?	It is questionable whether the "Design School Model" provides a practical solution to the problem of strategy formulation.

What about contractions?

Contractions–words that combine words and replace dropped letters with apostrophes–are common in everyday speech and many other situations. In academic writing, some common contractions are acceptable (for example, can't, don't), but **most contractions should be avoided.** Some instructors prefer no contractions at all, so **if in doubt, remove them all.**