

ACADEMIC WRITING STYLE: CLARITY

What is academic writing style?

Academic writing style refers to the rules and conventions for producing written work in academic contexts. Although variations exist across disciplines, we can identify some common features:

- **Formality**,
- **Objectivity**, and
- **Clarity**.

This Survival Guide focuses on the third feature, **clarity**. A piece of writing is clear when your ideas are presented in a **precise and concise** manner so they can be understood easily. The remainder of this guide provides strategies for writing clearly.

TIP

This guide discusses ways to make your writing more precise and concise. For tips on making core messages easy to find see the Clear Writing and Editing guide.

How to be precise

Being precise means using exact language to communicate your intended message. Doing so allows you to demonstrate your knowledge and understanding.

Specify what you mean: provide details, examples and explanations so your meaning is clear. Avoid using vague descriptors in your writing, e.g.

Vague sentence: Alan used the skills learnt in the course to start a business.



What skills? And what course?

Clear sentence: Alan used the **finance skills learnt in the *Certificate IV* course in *Entrepreneurship*** to start a business.

Use appropriate technical language: discipline-specific terminology refers to the phrasing and technical words used within a discipline. This language can help you discuss, critique and build on complex ideas with more precision.

Be proactive in developing your discipline-specific vocabulary, for example by:

- Starting a glossary to record new terms from your readings and lectures; and
- Using a discipline-specific dictionary.

TIP

There are many free online resources for developing your vocabulary. Check out the Free Dictionary's [Engineering Dictionary](#), [Medical Dictionary](#), [Legal Dictionary](#), and [Financial Dictionary](#), as well as the [Oxford Dictionary of Education](#).

BUT beware of jargon: technical language can make your writing more precise if used appropriately. However, misusing (or overusing) technical words or phrases can make your writing **opaque** (difficult to understand), rather than **clear**.



TIP

Be sure to (briefly) explain any key concepts and terminology in your work, as well as identifying abbreviations (e.g. UN = United Nations) the first time you use them.

How to be concise

Concise writing is succinct and to the point. Writing in this way allows your reader to understand you easily without having to unpack too many words.

To make your writing more concise, try the following strategies:

Strategy 1: replace wordy or empty phrases with one-word alternatives

Wordy phrases		Replacement
at this point in time	➡	now
in the not too distant future	➡	soon
is able to	➡	can
in the final analysis	➡	finally
in spite of the fact that	➡	although

Strategy 2: Eliminate redundancies

Redundancies are meaningless repetitions that make your writing wordy, e.g.

First ~~and foremost~~, the radio was old. ✂

The courtyard was round ~~in shape~~. ✂

Employees ~~who work in the same company~~ are encouraged to collaborate across teams. ✂

Strategy 3: replace phrasal verbs

Phrasal verbs are **multi-word verbs** (e.g. *put forward, talk about*) comprising a verb and an adverb and/or a preposition.

Replace these verbs with single-word verbs to make your writing more concise, e.g.

bring up	➡	raise
look into	➡	investigate
speed up	➡	accelerate
deal with	➡	address
go back	➡	return

TIP

As well as being wordy, many phrasal verbs are more appropriate in conversation than in formal academic writing. For more information, check out the Academic Writing Style: Formality survival guide.

Strategy 4: avoid convoluted sentences

To avoid writing convoluted sentences, eliminate **expletive constructions** like 'there is', 'there are' and 'it is', e.g.

*In 1982, **there were** one billion people in China; today, **there are** 1.41 billion people.*



*China's population **grew** from one billion in 1982 to 1.41 billion people today.*

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