

Language is alive and changing all the time. How language is used varies between cultures and in the typical University culture language rules continue to tend to be formal. However, you should also note that increasingly there are occasions when other conventions are allowed to apply.

Academic language, therefore, tends to be described as:

- Formal
- Cautious
- Objective
- Impersonal.

It is assumed that if your writing includes these features, you are communicating professionally. While there are clear, important differences between written and spoken communication, it would be wrong to say that all academic pieces are formal, objective and impersonal. The style of writing depends on the discipline you choose – for example: a creative writer does not have to follow these conventions, nor does an anthropologist depending on the kind of document they are creating. (Indeed, anthropologists would argue that it is impossible to be objective.)



Note: As writing conventions vary, it is best to ask each lecturer what they require from you.

1. What does formal mean?

Formal means not chatty or casual. It means avoiding colloquialisms – things like slang, contractions, abbreviations and even the kinds of turns of phrase that are commonly used in the media.

Formal writing styles require you to be precise and avoid terms that could be easily misinterpreted. You know that you are using formal language when your work does not sound like you are talking when it is read out.

Colloquialisms

Colloquialisms are informal words or phrases that are used in ordinary conversations at home or in the street. One uses colloquialisms in casual communication like speech between friends. Colloquialisms play with grammar and misuse it. The terms can be faddish and move quickly through trends.



Examples of Slang

- Dude
- Cool (for good)
- Tool (for stupid)
- Sick (for good)
- Poggers (???? No one knows what that means!)

Examples of Contractions

'Contractions' is not referring to giving birth but describes shortening words instead of using their full form. Common examples are **don't, they've, we'll**. In your essays write you need to avoid contractions and so therefore write these kinds of things out in full as - **do not, they have, and we will**.

What do you mean 'Turn of Phrase'?

A turn of phrase is a type of expression or saying that is commonly used in the media. An example is the phrase, 'political heavyweights'. Political heavyweights is the kind of descriptor used in the Press to label important politicians who figure heavily in public life. The phrase is, however, an example of something that too informal for your college work. Better to write, 'leading political figures' or something similar to avoid using 'headline speak'.



2. What does cautious mean?

Cautious writing means you avoid making definitive statements. You suggest - and if you do make a claim, you ensure that you have backed it up with a citation or quote from a reputable source.

Cautious writing is sometimes referred to as 'hedging' and is said to be a method that establishes the differences between asserting facts and claims. Why is this important? Because all knowledge comes with uncertainty and so therefore it is better to say something is probably the case, rather than is definitely the case. This kind of linguistic device reduces criticism of your points and signals that you are a balanced careful, rather than strident opinionated, thinker.

Words that indicate you are being cautious:

- Believe
- Suggest
- Appear to be
- Perhaps
- Looks like
- Possibly

Words that indicate you are certain:

- Will
- Always
- Definitely
- Unquestionably

If you are certain remember you must use evidence to substantiate what you are saying. Without supporting with evidence, you could be in trouble.

3. What does objective mean?

Being objective suggests that you are avoiding bias, beliefs, ideology or emotion. It implies what you are writing is based on evidence and facts.

The opposite of objective is subjective. Being subjective is when you are relying on your opinions, beliefs etc to come to conclusions. This is considered problematic for many disciplines (but not all of them!).

This sentence provides an example of subjectivity creeping into what should be exclusively objective information.

'The experiment was frustrating because we had to work overtime to complete it.'

The word 'frustrating' should not be there. It doesn't objectively describe the experiment. Similarly, telling the reader that one had to work overtime is not relevant. It is acceptable to embrace this kind of subjective detail in some types of documents. For example, a fieldwork diary or work journal is expected to include subjective information. Equally, reflective and reflexive accounts demand subjective detail, as does writing opinion pieces.

4. What does impersonal mean?

Impersonal writing separates the author from the text by avoiding using personal pronouns such as, 'I' or 'we'. Consequently, you will often be asked to say, 'This report demonstrates' rather than 'I will show'.

When writing a piece that asks for an impersonal style, use what is called 'the 3rd person' – a perspective that distances you from the writing. Like this:

- Instead of 'We found out', write: '*This research indicates*'
- Instead of 'I think' write: '



Academic writing must also be accurate, inclusive and non-discriminatory.

Inaccurate terms like: 'The West', using exclusive language such as: 'Man-made', or 'Mankind' and discriminatory language, such as: 'the disabled' or 'part-Indian' or 'gays' must be avoided at all times.

The West is an undefined location that includes many nations full of very different ways of being. Better to stay the country, group of countries, the culture or the specific practice you are referring to – for example: The French. Industrialised nations, Europeans, Euro-American societies etc.

Man-made or Mankind are exclusive terms that ignore half of the population of the world. You must use terms like, humanity or people instead.

Instead of 'the' disabled, or 'the' homeless say homeless people or people with different abilities. Or a person with a disability.

[This site provides more info on best practice.](#)

Now that you have read through this document, have a go at the quizzes posted below. You will need to revisit this document to complete your assignment.