**Polishing Your Academic Writing Style**

**Polishing a Draft**

The polishing step assumes that a text has been proofread and is error-free (grammar, spelling, punctuation), is structured appropriately for the writing genre and the publisher, and contains no factual errors (but omissions – i.e. missing facts - are a different problem).

**Polishing** refers to improvements that are made to a text to:

* create a more successful engagement and a more satisfying ending for the intended reader,
* produce a better balance in academic register, and amount of detail (within similar text elements),
* ensure clarity in the defining and use of terminology,
* create an effective, logical flow from point to point,
* fix awkward, run-on or confusing sentence structure (that is otherwise grammatically correct),
* eliminate slang, idioms, and flowery or conversational language,
* employ more elegant vocabulary and more appropriate words and phrases for the context.

When done as part of the peer-review process, polishing advice should be given to the writer as suggestions for alternative wording, rather than as corrections.

For example, an unpolished sentence,

*As opposed to the first system, the second one is seen to be less complicated.*

becomes an implicit comparison, using more elegant and context-specific language,

*The re-designed system (Figure 2) has fewer components than the original system (Figure 1).*

**RECALL:**

The register (style) used in academic English is quite different from informal/colloquial spoken English and/or informal written English. Informal language tends to be intimate whereas academic discourse is neutral/de-personalized. **Keep your relationship (usually *remote* in academia) with your audience in mind!**

Some features of written academic style are recalled below:

1. **Choose the correct verb**

In everyday English it is usual to choose a phrasal or prepositional verb to describe an action, whereas in written academic English, it is common to use a single verb.

* Informal: The company will keep on going as long as possible.
* Academic: The company will continue as long as possible.
1. **Avoid Contractions**

Avoid the use of contractions in academic language.

* Informal: The actions of the chairman proved that they’d performed badly.
* Academic: The actions of the chairman proved that they had performed badly.
1. **Avoid Idiomatic/Colloquial Language**

Some expressions in English are more idiomatic and are more appropriate for spoken English. Colloquialisms are not appropriate for formal written English.

* Informal: The company got good results from the marketing.
* Academic: The company received favourable results from the marketing.
* Informal: They dispatched a lot of application forms.
* Academic: They dispatched numerous application forms.
1. **Use the more appropriate formal negative forms**
* not …… any → no
* not …… much → little
* not ……many → few
1. **Use nominalisation**

Nominalisation allows us to represent one event as causing another event in a single clause. It is very common in academic writing to use a noun to represent an event or process, rather than a verb.

🗴 JIT stock control was adopted. This was because of its greater efficiency.

🗸 The adoption of JIT was due to its greater efficiency.

1. **Limit the use of ‘run on’ expressions such *as and so forth* and *etc.***

🗴 These devices can be used in batch, continuous process and so forth.

🗸 These devices can be used in batch, continuous process and other production.

1. **Avoid 2nd-person pronouns / imperatives (i.e. don’t address the reader as ‘you’)**

🗴 You can see the results in table 1.

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1. **Avoid 1st-person pronouns – use neutral subject words and/or the passive voice**

Most courses prefer you to avoid personal pronouns such as ‘I’, ‘we’ and ‘you’.

* It can be seen that ……
* There are a number of ……
* It has been found that ……
1. **Limit the use of direct questions and avoid rhetorical questions**

🗴 What can be done to improve productivity?

🗸 It could be important to consider how productivity can be improved.

1. **Place adverbs within the verbs**

In academic writing, adverbs are often placed mid-position rather than in the initial or final positions. In informal English, adverbs often occur as clauses at the beginning or end of sentences.

🗴 Then the audit is carried out.

🗸 The audit is then carried out.

🗴 The new appraisal system was introduced slowly.

🗸 The new appraisal system was slowly introduced.

1. **Avoid vague, meaningless and simple terms**
* Thing → What is a thing?
* Stuff → Uncountable form of “thing”
* Huge → How large?
* Nowadays → An annoying IELTS term
* Everybody knows → No, they do not.
* Human beings → Are you talking about monkeys?
* Big, lots of → Too simple / vague
1. **Avoid flowery / emotive terms**

beautiful, lovely, happy, wonderful, awful, terrible, tragic

1. **Avoid generalisations**

everyone, everywhere, all, always, Chinese people, and never

1. **Avoid proverbs / sayings / “stock phrases”**

every coin has two sides, a colourful life, with the development of the society

1. **Be cautious – use “hedging language”**

Academic writing generally sounds cautious. Writers indicate that they are aware that nothing is completely certain. They use words that express this lack of certainty.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| * appear to ……
* seem to ……
* tend to ……
* may ……
 | * might ……
* possibly ……
* probably
* apparently
 | * generally
* seemingly
* in some cases, this ……
* the evidence suggests that……
 |

**Three main elements of “hedging” are:**

* comment adjuncts (e.g. “It is arguable / likely / evident / apparent that… “)
* modal adjuncts (e.g. arguably / probably / possibly / evidently / apparently)
* modal verbs (see below) – crucial for reporting / recommending / extrapolating, etc.

**The Modal Verbs**

The modal verbs in fact include “will”. All modal verbs conform to the fundamental pattern:

Taking everything into consideration at the moment of speaking/writing, the speaker/writer deems it:

[modal verb] that…

In the case of “**will**”, the speaker/writer considers it *logically inevitable* that…

The other [main] modal verbs used in reporting (and their meanings in that context) are:

**may** *50% likely that*

**might** *less than 50% probable that*

**can** *realistically possible (i.e. eminently feasible) that*

**could** *hypothetically possible that*

**must** *obligatory/mandatory/necessary (for intrinsic reasons) that*

**have to** *obligatory/mandatory/necessary (for extrinsic reasons) that*

**need to** *obligatory/mandatory/necessary (for intrinsic or extrinsic reasons) that*

**ought to** *advisable/predictable/deducible (but not likely) that*

**should***advisable/predictable/deducible that*