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Basic Conventions of Academic Writing

My aim in this chapter is to highlight the main, basic conventions of academic writing. A 'convention' is, in some cases, a rule to follow, or it can be a technique your tutors expect to see used in your assignments. Your lecturers, professors and other tutors have to follow these same rules when they publish books and journal articles.

If you are used to writing essays, you may find that you are familiar with much of this material, some of which I would consider 'basic'. If you're just starting at university, or haven't studied for a while, some of these ideas might be newer to you.

Read this section carefully. It's surprising how often students submit essays with these conventions ignored or misused. 'How' to write at university is just as important as 'what' to write. The two go together.

WHAT YOUR TUTORS SAY

'Correct grammar and referencing, indicates that you care about how you present yourself.' – Mariann, Biosciences lecturer

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Mariann makes this same point: your knowledge of a particular subject, and the content of your answer to an essay question, by themselves are not enough to satisfy the tutors marking your work. You are expected to engage with the academic debate in an academic way, and 'present yourself' accordingly.

Mariann mentions grammar and referencing; this also applies to academic conventions.

As you progress through your studies, this material will become more familiar. Most of these conventions apply to presentations too. Becoming comfortable with these basic rules is greatly helped by the *reading* we have to do as part of our time at university.

When you read a journal article for your next seminar, or learn how to perform a particular experiment from a textbook, or are simply picking relevant books from the library shelves, don't just focus on the *content*, as important as that is. Try and absorb the way these conventions come up again and again in all the academic writing you'll have to *read*.

It's really important to pay close attention to your reading, beyond its content. This is *the* best way of developing your own writing. Books like this, and the academic skills workshops your university runs, are important; but only if you are doing the reading expected of you, and then *more*. I have already mentioned this, and will continue to repeat this point throughout the book, because it is a vital, overlooked and very *simple* way of slowly developing and improving your own writing.

Why does academic writing have rules? Good academic writing has various qualities; it is clear, formal, objective and supported.

Additionally, because you are writing about potentially complex ideas, it should be as simple as possible, in order to make these ideas clear. So academic writing might end up being complex, but you should never *try* to write things in a complex way. Discuss your ideas at a high enough level, and the complexity is almost like the 'side effect' you get with medicines; it is not an actual objective of your writing. At university, you'll be discussing serious and important ideas a lot of the time, and complexity will naturally grow out of that.

More examples of some other academic techniques appear in the chapter, 'Common Mistakes and How to Deal With Them'. In that chapter I also provide more examples of how issues appear and how to resolve them. The aim of this chapter is to *introduce* you to the *basic* conventions. After that, we can look at grammatical issues and the process of actually putting an argument together. This list is not meant to be exhaustive, but I have tried to cover the most important and common conventions.

Before we go on to discuss some conventions one-by-one, it's worth noting one final point. This book does not stick to all of them. I intended to write a friendly, easygoing guide. You already have plenty of reading to do as part of your course. I've explained how important it is that you take the time to learn from that too!

Although my writing is *relatively* formal, the level of formality is occasionally lower than would be expected of your essays – the exclamation mark I used in

the previous sentence, for example, and the way I address my readers as 'you', are examples of features in my writing that would not be appropriate in an academic essay. Where this point is particularly important, I'll highlight it again.

Using acronyms

Acronyms are words grouped together then referred to by their first letters. You're likely to encounter many in an academic environment. Here are some examples: BBC, HEI, USA, IT.

These must be written in a particular way in academic writing. This is an excellent example of a simple convention that, followed properly, makes writing clearer. In a 'normal' length essay (anything less than, say, 8000 words), simply write the term out *in full* and indicate the acronym in brackets afterwards. After this, you can just use the acronym. Here's an example:

> ✓ The budget cuts proposed raised doubts among officials at the Ministry of Defence (MoD). A spokesman for the MoD confirmed discussions were ongoing.

After the example sentence, the acronym 'MoD' could be used.

If you a writing a longer piece of work, like a dissertation, it might be worth occasionally 'reminding' your readers of a particular acronym. You might use the full phrase the first time you use it in each chapter. Another option, particularly if a piece of work contains many different acronyms, is to have a glossary or appendix that lists them all in one place. Ask your tutor what kind of techniques they would like you to use.

Key Point

There are some acronyms which don't need to be given in full. It is unlikely, for example, that you'll need to write 'United Kingdom' instead of UK, because this is common knowledge. I'd also say the same about 'USA'. If in doubt, however, write the full term first, as I did in the example. You will need to exercise judgement as to which acronyms won't need to be written in full – but *most* of them will.

Establishing objectivity

'Objectivity' is a quality you need your assignments to have. What does it mean to be objective when you write?

Objectivity refers to a deliberate distance between yourself as a writer and the subject matter of your assignment. Being objective is about creating this distance. Objectivity is established in various ways. I discuss some of these ways separately: for example, avoiding the first and second person (discussed later in the chapter) is a way of establishing objectivity by making your writing seem less 'familiar'.

Some students find it useful to think about the opposite of objectivity – 'subjectivity'. If you are writing in a *subjective* way, you seem very close to your subject. Another way to think about this difference is this: imagine objectivity as being on the outside looking in. Subjectivity is being on the inside looking out.

So, instead of writing about your own experiences, you write about the research and reading you've done. Instead of making points based on your *opinions*, write about the conclusion to which your research has led you. Instead of writing based on a chat, or argument, you had with your friends, use an interview you've conducted with an academic *expert* in the field.

There is an important exception to be aware of. Some subjects at university involve a kind of academic writing called 'reflective writing'. Reflective writing is about your reflections on experiences you've had; they will be experiences relevant to the topic, or to your course. Writing a report on a work placement you completed, for example, would involve reflection. Reflective assignments ask you to discuss what you've learned from certain experiences, in the context of the theory you've been taught and the academic texts you've read.

More examples include teaching-based courses: you might be asked to write about your week teaching at a school. If you are undertaking any kind of work placement on, for example, an engineering course, you might be assigned to write a diary or some kind of summary of what you did and what you learned. Similarly, if you complete a group project, writing up the way the group made decisions and worked together (which would clearly include you as a member of the group) might also involve recounting your own experiences.

This section has made clear the importance of being objective. Following and understanding some of the other conventions in this chapter will actually help you achieve objectivity in your academic writing.

Using colloquial language or contractions, for example, makes writing seem subjective. This is because your reader will get the impression that you are less serious (and not thinking in an academic way) about your subject.

The first and second person (words like 'I', 'you', etc.) use very *personal* nouns that decrease the distance between writer and subject. Use the third person to create that distance. *Reference* the work of other academics, researchers and authors to show your engagement with the academic debate on a topic.

Below I provide two examples from an essay about the principles community workers need to be aware of during their work. Each sentence is making a similar, though not identical point. One is obviously *subjective*, with little or

no distance between the writer and the topic. By contrast, the second is *objective*, and so has established this distance.

Compare:

> ✗ I would feel really hurt if someone passed on personal information about me without my knowledge.

with

> ✓ Community workers must follow ethical conventions so as not to undermine trust.

Both make a valid point. The first sentence, however, makes the point in a very personal way. The use of the first person 'I' reinforces the sense that the writer is discussing a situation from *their own* frame of reference. The second sentence takes the key point, about ethical conventions, and makes it in a calm, objective way.

Referencing correctly

This book doesn't go into great detail about how to reference (the conventions of which will vary from course to course and university to university), but any guide to academic writing must mention it. This is a brief summary; I go into more detail about referencing in a later chapter.

WHAT YOUR TUTORS SAY

'It is essential that your work provides linkages and examples from appropriate academic sources to evidence and provide scholarly context to your work.' – Fiona, Youth & Community Work lecturer

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Fiona uses the word 'essential': you will almost always be expected to reference other sources in your work. If you write an essay with no references, you will get very low marks. Think about the journals and books you've been reading on your course. They're likely to be full of references.

There are various other words and techniques associated with referencing. Various referencing styles and systems exist (you might hear about 'citing', 'footnotes', the 'Harvard style', 'numeric referencing', and much more). However, *referencing* as a whole means making it clear when the ideas, concepts, quotations, diagrams, definitions, images or arguments in your work come from elsewhere. 'Elsewhere' might mean other books, conferences, journal articles, online sources, and so on.

This will be discussed later on, but a *crucial* part of writing essays and assignments is engaging with the body of research, writing and discussion on a particular topic or subject. There will be a wide selection of ideas at a subject level, and additional debate and discussion about specific parts of the subject or topics within it.

There will always be debate and discussion on a subject. Studying at university level is a way of entering that debate. This is why you'll be made to read books, research, conduct laboratory experiments, and so on.

Referencing, however you are expected to do it, is how you'll point out that a particular quote, for example, came from a specific page in a specific book; or that a particular painting is very important to the history of art.

In short, almost every essay or assignment you write at university should contain references. Be aware that not every essay question you are assigned will explicitly say 'reference other sources in your answer' (some might do, if there are specific texts that you have to include, for example). This does not mean you won't be expected to engage with your reading material and prove that you have done so in your essay. This is expected of students to such an extent that sometimes it is not even pointed out.

In the chapter on critical thinking and referencing, and the final chapter about common mistakes, referencing *effectively* will be examined more closely. Different referencing styles are outlined: you'll need to double-check which one your tutors want you to use.

It will take a long time before you can remember exactly how to reference a particular source, especially an obscure one. Even your lecturers will sometimes have to look up an example for their own work. Whether or not you can do it from memory, you *will* have to reference properly and consistently.

Avoiding slang/colloquial language

Academic writing is formal. This is commonly accepted by most students. What sometimes is not grasped properly is *why* it is formal. Formality in academic writing doesn't come from deliberately writing difficult, complex sentences, or using complex words where simple ones would serve the same purpose. It comes from making sure that no inappropriate informal language, like slang, is used. This also reinforces the sense of objectivity.

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If a writer uses familiar turns of phrase from their everyday colloquial language, the sense of distance from the content might be lost. An assignment written in this way would seem more like an informal, spoken 'chat' about a subject rather than an academic discussion.

Additionally, in most cases, academic writing should be *literal*. This means that words and phrases used should operate according to their actual dictionary definitions. Quite often, slang, and colloquial phrases from speech, are not literal. Here is an example of a common phrase that is not literal and, as such, would be inappropriate in an essay:

> ✗ It is widely accepted that election campaigns go the extra mile in their final weeks.

The phrase 'go the extra mile' means, in informal English, to make additional effort, to try harder. Taken literally, however, this sentence suggests that staff working on political campaigns travel an additional mile nearer election time! A simple, literal version of the sentence might look like this:

> ✓ It is widely accepted that election campaigns increase their efforts in the final weeks.

So what is slang? What is 'colloquial language'; what are 'colloquialisms'? You have just seen an example.

Although most students are aware that they should not use 'informal' language in essays, it is the definition of 'informal' or 'slang' that is more difficult. Unfortunately, this book can only help to a certain extent, and provide some guidelines.

In the following box are some examples, from essays on various subjects, of sentences that contain one or more colloquial words or phrases. Some of them are obviously informal, and might even make you laugh; others might surprise you. I will provide improved versions afterwards.

> ✗ Saddam Hussein was a bad dude.
>
> ✗ The company, in an attempt to cut costs, fired 5% of the workforce in 2004.
>
> ✗ Most of the research cited here concludes with the question how come only two hearings in Parliament have been held about this issue.
>
> *(Continued)*

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(Continued)

- ✗ Analysing the tendency of pop music to borrow from dance-based genres from a postmodern standpoint limits conclusions. The scene has never really focused on that kind of stuff.

- ✗ Bradshaw (2009) decides that the conclusion is clear as crystal: sporting activity should be promoted more to kids at a young age.

In the first sentence, 'bad dude' is almost laughably informal. 'Dude' is outright slang, and the word 'bad' is just as informal; even worse, 'bad dude' is a subjective value judgement that does not make a point in an academic way. A better idea would be to give the reader actual evidence as to why the author deems Saddam to have been a 'bad dude':

- ✓ Saddam Hussein, after coming to power, embarked on a totalitarian rule of systematic terror; a rule catalogued by many, over the years (Makiya, 1989; Johnson, 2005; Hitchens, 2007).

The second sentence would be acceptable in an essay, except for one word: the verb 'fired', which is actually a slang term. As you've learned, academic writing should be *literal*. Clearly, terminating employment has nothing to do with fire, or flames! Here, then, is an example of a word common in speech, but not suitable for an academic essay. This can be easily corrected by replacing the word:

- ✓ The company, in an attempt to cut costs, terminated the contracts of 5% of the workforce in 2004.

In the third sentence, the informal phrase – one that comes directly from spoken English – is perhaps harder to spot. It is the forming of a question with the words 'how come'. Going back to our idea of literal English, we can see that the phrase 'how come' does not really mean anything.

Think about what the question is really asking. How would someone actually ask the question? 'Why have only two hearings been held?', most likely. I can use this to replace the phrase 'how come':

✓ Most of the research cited here concludes by questioning why only two hearings in Parliament have been held about this issue.

The fourth example contains two colloquial words or phrases, both in the second sentence.

First, the word 'stuff' is inappropriate in academic writing. It is not literal, and is also vague and informal – three things you do not want your writing to be described as! The phrase 'kind of stuff' is even vaguer, and makes the problem worse.

It is common to describe a particular fanbase as a 'scene' in speech, but here it should be replaced. Imagine this sentence being read by someone for whom English was not a first language. Slang phrases like this will not have the same meaning for them; another reason we should be literal in our words and phrases.

As you'll learn later in the book, the word 'really' rarely adds anything to academic writing (the same goes for 'very'). It doesn't mean much or give the reader any real information. As such, it adds to the informality of the sentence, and should be removed.

Here, then, is a possible adapted version of the second sentence:

✓ Analysing the tendency of pop music to borrow from dance-based genres from a postmodern standpoint limits conclusions. The contemporary fanbase of popular music tends not to focus on concepts like these.

The final problem sentence contains one 'cliché', as well as an instance of informal language. In addition, there is another problem with it. It is a different kind of problem, one that this book discusses later, but I will point it out anyway.

The phrase 'clear as crystal' is a 'cliché'. Clichés are common or stock phrases unique to a particular language, and overused in that language. Most clichés, a long time ago, were interesting ways of describing something, and have been used so often so as to become popular, and to lose their original effect.

Most people know them, and they are frequently used in speech. Every language has its own clichéd phrases, almost all of them too informal for academic writing.

Many clichés in the English language are based around describing things in subjective ways, which you should avoid in academic writing. Other examples

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include 'a diamond in the rough'; 'frightened to death'; 'read between the lines'. You'd never have cause to use many of them in an essay, but there are a few that appear occasionally!

'Clear as crystal' can be replaced with one word; the most obvious and simple choice is shown below.

Another problem expression is 'kids'. Literal English is clear on this: 'kids' are juvenile goats (as people who disapprove of the word 'kids' often point out!). The word should be replaced with the most obvious alternative: children.

The last problem, of a different nature, is the final phrase in the sentence: 'at a young age'.

The word 'children', which replaces 'kids', has a definition: it means people at a young age; thus the phrase 'at a young age' is not needed. All it is doing is repeating an idea established by another word.

If the source writer mentions a *specific* age, or refers to children at primary school (or another specific group), then this should be made clear.

This allows two possible approaches:

✓ Bradshaw (2009) decides that the conclusion is clear: sporting activity should be promoted more to children.

✓ Bradshaw (2009) decides that the conclusion is clear: sporting activity should be promoted more to children at primary school age.

Everyone has some awareness of slang, and colloquial, informal language that they might use in speech. As the examples have shown, however, such language can be harder to detect than you might think.

In the examples, I deliberately ensured that, apart from the problematic phrases, the sentences were academically appropriate. It is quite easy to find, and to avoid writing, entirely colloquial sentences or paragraphs. The occasional informal phrase is more of a danger.

As you read through your work, ask yourself:

- Does each word or phrase mean what a dictionary says it means?
- Is this phrase commonly heard in speech?
- Would I expect to see this in the textbooks and journals I read as part of my course?
- Would someone not as familiar with English as I am translate this correctly?

Think about that last point: someone using an English dictionary to translate 'clear as crystal', from the last example we changed, would probably wonder why your essay was suddenly referring to jewels!

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If any of your answers to these questions leaves you in doubt, take the approach we have just used. Replace the phrases you have concerns about with clear, effective, simple alternatives.

Avoiding emotive language

Avoiding emotive language is a skill similar to avoiding colloquial language. It is hard to define at first, but the more you write, the easier it will become.

Emotive language is not just language that could be described as 'emotional'. More than that, emotive language is used *deliberately* to evoke an emotion in the reader. This is common in some journalism, politics and fiction.

WHAT YOUR TUTORS SAY

'Rather than just arguing that, in your personal and/or professional opinion, young people are demonised by the media, provide examples, and cite scholarly work that further supports your observation. Such an approach will prevent tutors writing "evidence?" repeatedly in the margins of your assignments.' – Fiona, Youth & Community Work lecturer

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Fiona uses a specific example of a potentially emotive topic from her own area of expertise – the 'demonisation' of young people. She recommends using effective referencing from other sources to make it clear you are not just writing, in a subjective way, about your opinions. As you'll see, this is good advice about a very effective technique.

Academic writing involves making points based on evidence. Clearly, then, you do not want to use emotive language in assignments. You must avoid deliberately appealing to the emotions of your readers. Because you might be writing about a subject that has the potential to affect emotions, or provoke a powerful reaction, this can be difficult.

What *is* emotive language, though? Some words and phrases can be emotive in themselves. Others might be perfectly acceptable in an essay unless used as part of a particular phrase or in an emotive way. This is one of the conventions that you have to think carefully about.

Ultimately, you must use your common sense. Emotive language tends to be subjective, like colloquial language. The more you develop an objective writing style, the more naturally you will avoid emotive language.

Unfortunately, it is impossible to put every word in the dictionary into either a column titled 'emotive' or a column titled 'not emotive'! There are

some words and phrases in the box below. I'd argue that they could probably be considered emotive regardless of the context in which they're used. You should get an idea from this list of the kind of language associated with *emotional* rather than *logical* arguments.

- ✘ Horrible
- ✘ Disgraceful
- ✘ Disgusting
- ✘ Incredible
- ✘ Magnificent
- ✘ Dire
- ✘ Tragedy
- ✘ Wonderful
- ✘ Inflict

Key Point

The word 'tragedy', included in the above list, is commonly used in an emotive way in some journalism. However, it would be perfectly appropriate to use the term to refer to a play from the tragic genre (like many of Shakespeare's works). Understanding the vocabulary associated with your subject will help you differentiate between the appropriate and emotive use of certain words or phrases.

Here are some short example sentences, from a range of academic subjects, that could reasonably be described as emotive.

- ✘ Many studies (Hurford, 1982; Ryan, 1990; Jackson & Devon, 2002) reinforce the idea that environmental deregulation in Western states can leave parts of otherwise modern, thriving countries as treacherous, barren wasteland.
- ✘ The creation of the NHS by the wartime government of Britain was a towering, even dizzying, achievement.
- ✘ In the play, after the character's baby is born, the torment and turmoil that the family endures is sickening.

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> ✘ Where policies like this have been implemented in secondary schools, the schools have raced up league tables.
>
> ✘ Recent coverage of women's sport in the UK has, sadly, paid almost no attention whatsoever to athletic ability, instead, focusing – in a puerile way – on the appearance of the sportswomen.

Two points are worth noting immediately: emotive language is not only associated with *negative* portrayal of a topic. Language can be used to evoke positive emotions; either way, it is not appropriate in academic writing.

Emily, below, points out a problem with any subjective language – her example word is a positive one.

WHAT YOUR TUTORS SAY

'Be wary of using emotive language in your work. Even a word like "good" is problematic as it is subjective and can't be tested or measured. Good according to whom?' – Emily, Academic Skills lecturer

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Second, many of these sentences might be making valid points. The first one, for example, references several studies. Just because a sentence contains emotive language does not mean it is 'wrong' – the point just has to be made in an objective way. See Emily's question: 'good according to whom'?

As you can see, most (though not all) emotive language appears as description. Descriptive words (adjectives and adverbs) are discussed in the next chapter – you'll learn that they don't contribute much to academic writing. In the case of emotive description, they can damage your writing. By avoiding descriptive language and only using it when absolutely necessary, you are reducing the risk of using emotive language.

In one example, however, the verb (action word – see the next chapter) is emotive. This is the verb 'raced' in the fourth example. The author is trying to use a *descriptive* verb that does not just describe an action, but gives a sense of *how* the action occurs. However, in this case, it is exaggerated to the point that it becomes an emotive sentence.

Avoiding exaggeration, and exaggerated description in particular, is the best tactic to avoid emotive language – and this is likely to reduce your use of colloquial language too.

Because these sentences are making points to provoke a strong reaction in the reader, simply rephrasing them is not sufficient. You, as the author, have

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to decide on the evidence you can use to highlight the conclusion you are going to make. This is why I am not going to provide improved examples of all of the above sentences; so much depends on context.

I will improve one of them, however, to demonstrate the process. Here is the original, analysing the relationship between gender and sport:

> ✗ Recent coverage of women's sport in the UK has, sadly, paid almost no attention whatsoever to athletic ability, instead, focusing – in a puerile way – on the appearance of the sportswomen.

First, I'll identify the emotive language in the sentence: the word 'sadly', which might be acceptable if the rest of the sentence did not take such an emotive approach; the word 'whatsoever', which makes the claim seem more exaggerated; and the word 'puerile', which is not supported by any evidence, and seems to be the author's view.

To improve this sentence, I'd recommend the following steps: incorporate evidence into the sentence; find examples of the reactions of others to the coverage being discussed – this will make the writing seem less subjective; remove description that cannot be supported by evidence; and make it clear *why* a situation is 'sad' and must be improved, using a combination of evidence and the author's own conclusions.

The result might be something like this:

> ✓ Recent coverage of women's sport in the UK has, a variety of research concludes (Darking, 2009; Christopher & Wilson, 2010; Henderson, 2011), not focused enough on the sporting ability of sportswomen. This has generated some fierce reaction; Henderson references an interview in which a female footballer accused commentary of being 'puerile' (p24). The research points to the seriousness of the situation, which, regrettably, impacts negatively on gender relationships in younger people (Howard, 2010); a different approach is needed to change this situation.

The second version still expresses the idea that the situation is bad, and even demonstrates the emotional reactions that some people have shown – without being emotional or emotive itself. The references prove that there is agreement that the situation should change, and that there are far-reaching consequences that will continue if it does not.

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Ultimately, emotive language, like colloquial language, tends to be subjective, descriptive and exaggerated. The more you base your ideas in evidence, and demonstrate that you are doing so, the more effective your work will be. If there are powerful emotions involved in a debate, demonstrate this by providing examples of them: but do not display your own, or deliberately try to provoke them in your readers.

Avoiding the first person

The 'first person' is a grammatical term for using the words 'I', 'we', 'us', 'ours', 'my', and so on. In the next section on basic grammar, you'll learn more about different types of words. The examples I've just provided, to show you what the first person consists of, are *pronouns*. They can be singular ('I' and 'me' – just referring to you as a single person) or plural ('ours' and 'us' – you are part of a group, perhaps).

The first person is common in many kinds of writing (especially fiction) and in speech. Academic writing is very different – its aim is not to entertain or inform in a popular way, but to make an argument that engages with the academic discussion on a subject.

In this book, I use both the first person and the second person, which I discuss below. Although my writing here is fairly formal, use of the first person was a *deliberate* decision on my part to make the text seem 'friendlier' (and, indeed, less objective).

Students often ask 'Can I use the first person in my essays?'. Unfortunately, the answer is more complex than just 'no', but not much more complex. If in doubt, do *not* use the first person. Avoid it completely. Sometimes your tutors, or your course handbook, will explicitly tell you not to write in the first person; this makes things easier for you!

Sometimes, however, you might come across use of the first person in your reading, and sometimes you might need to use it in your writing. Very experienced academic writers sometimes use the first person in various ways. The aim here, however, is to become comfortable with the *basic* conventions of academic writing. As such, we will ignore some of these ways in which the first person can be used for effect, and look at the *main* exception to the rule 'do not use the first person in academic writing'.

The main exception is the 'reflective' writing I have already mentioned.

Reflective writing involves reflection on things that have happened to *you*. You cannot pretend they happened to someone else, so you write about them in the first person. It will usually be clear if your assignment requires this kind of reflection. If you are in doubt, ask your tutor if he or she expects use of the first person (which is usually unavoidable in reflective writing).

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Avoiding the second person

The *second* person is, as you might have guessed, a way of directly addressing someone else. Second person pronouns include 'you', 'your' and 'yours'. Some languages have a different word for the plural 'you' (several people being addressed directly) and the singular 'you' (just one person), but English does not.

However, the second person in English has a very distinct purpose beyond allowing you to talk or write to people (imagine writing a text or email to a friend without using 'you'!). It is used, quite often, in a *general* way, meaning 'people'. This is very common in spoken English.

I'll give you some examples to show you what I mean:

> ✗ If you want a career in engineering, you will have to show dedication and focus.

Now, if this is a careers advisor speaking to a specific student or group of students, then the second person is entirely appropriate (though it wouldn't be an example of academic writing). However, if you write this in an essay about the engineering industry, you are talking *generally*. Substitute 'people' for 'you' and the sentence means the same thing. Substitute, then, 'people' for the first 'you', and the pronoun 'they' for the second 'you'. Using 'you' twice would result in an odd sentence. This leaves you with:

> ✓ If people want a career in engineering, they will have to show dedication and focus.

Here's an example from an English essay, discussing poetry:

> ✗ You really have to read Donne's poetry aloud to fully appreciate his use of language.

Again, what the student here means by 'you' is 'the reader'. While *you*, reading the essay, might technically be called the reader, it is reasonable to assume the student is not addressing *you*, because he or she is addressing *everyone* reading the assignment.

Unlike the use of the first person, the second person should simply be *completely avoided in all academic writing*. When students use the second person

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in an essay (this is, unfortunately, a *very* common issue) it is almost always in the general way. This makes writing very informal because it is an aspect of spoken English. Remember, to create objectivity and a sense of academic discussion, things we might *say* as part of a less formal conversation might not be appropriate in academic writing.

It is very easy to check if you have used the second person in a typed assignment. Almost all word processors have a 'find' tool – use it, and search for the word 'you'. It will highlight the word wherever it appears. It will also find 'your' because the first three letters are the same.

Then, simply ask yourself, '*who* do I actually mean?' and make this clear. If you are using it in the general way (which is likely), rephrase the sentence. Work out what key point you are making and write clearly and simply in the third person.

Take the example from the English essay, above. The sentence is making a basic, and potentially valid, point – that Donne's work is better appreciated, or understood, read aloud. The sentence can be rewritten in several ways to say that quite clearly, with no use of the second person 'you'. One way of doing this might be:

> ✓ Donne's work is best appreciated when spoken aloud.

An alternative sentence would be:

> ✓ Reading Donne's work aloud gives the reader a better sense of the poems.

Both are simple and clear and make the same point without using the second person. The important thing here is not to think too hard about how to remove the 'you'; just do it as *simply as you can*.

Here is another example:

> ✗ The financial crisis in 2008 showed that sometimes you can't rely on the opinions of experts because nobody predicted the crisis.

'You' is being used in the general way. The basic point of the sentence can easily be expressed without 'you'; here is just one possibility:

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> ✓ Most experts failed to predict the financial crisis in 2008, which highlights the problem of relying on expert opinion.

There is another important rule to remember when resolving this problem. Students, finding they've used the second person 'you', sometimes think it's appropriate to replace it with the first person 'we' instead.

This is not common in speech, but for some reason is intended to serve a similar purpose to 'you' in essays. I'm not sure why students do this, but I have read it so many times I wanted to warn you here *not* to simply replace the second person 'you' with 'we'. For example:

Do *not* change

> ✗ You can't understand the conflict between Russia and Georgia in 2008 without an awareness of the region's history.

to

> ✗ We can't understand the conflict between Russia and Georgia in 2008 without an awareness of the region's history.

but instead to something like:

> ✓ An awareness of the region's history is needed to understand the conflict between Russia and Georgia in 2008.

In short: do not use the second person, and when removing it, do not simply replace it with the first person. Use the more objective third person instead.

Avoiding contractions

A 'contraction' is one word, made up of two or more words that have been joined together. Some letters from the words are left out and replaced with an apostrophe.

The apostrophe is a piece of punctuation that is misused in many ways. Some of these are discussed in the chapter on basic grammar, and in the chapter on common mistakes. Here, I focus exclusively on contractions – specifically, *not* using them in academic writing. This is another convention I have *not* rigidly followed in this book.

Examples are not hard to find, particularly in speech, or popular writing:

- 'Cannot' in its contracted form is 'can't'
- 'Will not' becomes 'won't'
- 'He is' or 'he has' become 'he's'
- 'Should not' becomes 'shouldn't'
- 'There will' becomes 'there'll'

The rule is simple: do not use contractions in academic writing.

Luckily, as with some of the other conventions, contractions are quite easy to find during your proofreading process. Just type an apostrophe into the 'find' tool of your word processor and you can examine the apostrophes you have used, one-by-one.

This will, of course, mean checking apostrophes used for other reasons (like possessives, or when quoting other sources; both will be mentioned later in the book). However, as soon as you see an apostrophe used in a contraction, you can just type the words out in full. It is certainly not worth losing marks because of an issue so easily fixed.

Simplicity, clarity and conciseness

This is not a single convention, but a broader issue of writing style. The example discussed below is longer than the previous examples in this chapter, and it involves more complex issues.

The later chapter called, unsurprisingly, 'Conciseness and Clarity', looks in more detail at specific techniques to make your writing effective. However, the sooner you start thinking about this issue, the better you will be at putting it into practice.

The three ideas are so intertwined I will not separate them. Essentially, you should use as few words as possible to make a point (conciseness); these *individual* words should be as straightforward as they can be without being informal or inappropriate (simplicity); and they should be put together in a way that makes your point effective and easy-to-understand (clarity).

This is a key theme of the book in a way that the other subsections of this chapter are not (this book is not, for example, all about acronyms). Writing simply, concisely and clearly is, however, a key *convention* of academic writing.

In fact, it is a key theme of the book *because* it is an essential convention of academic writing.

For now, I'm going to take one example and discuss it in some detail. In the same way that many of these conventions reinforce objectivity in writing, many also reinforce *clarity*. Conciseness is a feature of our writing that we have to learn to perfect ourselves. It is difficult!

Take a look at the two extracts below. Then you can read my explanation of the changes.

> ✖ To succeed in obtaining and achieving the highest possible marks in assignments, students must engage in a genuine and concerted attempt to conduct extensive research, devote much time to the planning process, and finally ensure they are entirely comfortable and confident with the rules of English grammar.

> ✓ To receive the highest possible marks in assignments, students must research effectively, spend enough time planning, and make sure they are confident with grammar.

Would you agree that the two extracts say very similar things? I'd argue that they say practically identical things. The first is over-the-top, unnecessarily formal and repetitive, and overlong. We do not need to labour our points. The second is clearly much shorter, which will give you valuable space to make more points, or support this one with references.

What follows is an outline of my thought process and reasoning behind the changes I've made; as you can see, I've rephrased/reworded large parts of the first version, as well as deleting sections. Everyone will do this kind of thing differently, and there are many different ways I could have altered the first example. So rather than seeing my explanation as a 'solution' to a specific problem, try and see it as an example of one approach to the convention of writing clearly and concisely. Try and view it, also, as showing you the kind of state of mind you should be in when you edit what you've written.

This following section is quite detailed. You might need to return to this part of the book. For now, read over this a few times – you'll see how many techniques and approaches to writing there are, and how many choices you have to make. The more you read, and the more you write and adopt these conventions, the more naturally you will think about the following kinds of points.

With all that in mind, let's take a look at why I changed the extract:

To begin with, the sentence is too long. Even if I hadn't managed to shorten it as much as I have, I would have broken it down into several shorter sentences.

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Read it aloud and you will probably end up breathless. This is a sure sign a sentence is too long. Sentences that make you breathless are also likely to be too complex.

I thought that 'To succeed in obtaining and achieving the highest possible marks' could be reduced to 'to get the highest possible marks'. Surely using the verbs 'obtaining' *and* 'achieving' is unnecessary. These two words are doing the same thing in the sentence. The student is doing the same thing with the marks – receiving them.

I *could* have used the verb 'to get', but 'get' can often seem informal. 'Get' can be a troublesome verb. Many languages that are similar to English do not have a direct equivalent.

Key Point

Here is another quick example that illustrates potential problems with the word 'get'. Compare 'the patient got better' and 'the patient recovered'. The second is more formal, and shorter too.

Moving on, I've shortened 'students must engage in a genuine and concerted attempt to conduct extensive research'. In the second sentence I replace this with 'students must research effectively'.

Ask yourself: if you go into the library, eager to write your best essay yet, and you 'engage in a genuine and concerted attempt to conduct extensive research', what are you actually doing? You are researching *well*. That wasn't formal enough, so I went with *effectively*, which means a similar thing. You are researching in a way that provides you with lots of great points to go into your essay. I could also have used 'thoroughly'.

Key Point

The other difference here, which this book discusses further later on, is that I have used a stronger verb. 'Research', a key academic concept, is used as a verb, an action word – 'to research'. In the original, 'research' was a noun. There were two verbs – 'engage' and 'conduct'. Neither mean anything without the nouns 'attempt' and 'research' attached to them.

It is better to use effective, strong verbs. Again, think of the difference between 'I conduct research into endangered animals' and 'I research endangered animals'. The verb in the second sentence is stronger, carries more meaning on its own, and because of this the sentence is shorter without losing any of its message.

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My updated version of the first extract is certainly not the best or only reworking possible. I could have written, 'students must research extensively and effectively', but I decided that if you are researching effectively, your research is probably extensive too.

My second version has, perhaps, lost the sense of a student trying hard. This can be seen in the first version in the phrase 'a genuine and concerted attempt'. To emphasise that idea of *trying* as well as 'effectiveness', I might write the sentence differently. An example might be: 'students must make the effort to research effectively'.

Next, I changed 'devote much time to the planning process' to 'spend enough time planning'. I thought 'devote' sounded a bit over-the-top, while 'spending' time is perfectly fine. That said, I have, as above, perhaps lost the sense of intense effort.

My worry, though, was that the first extract was not only unnecessarily formal, but seemed too hyperbolic. 'Hyperbole' means deliberately writing or speaking with exaggeration to have a specific effect. This is a technique commonly used in political speeches or opinion-writing. Academic writing should make arguments reinforced by evidence, research and reason.

You'll notice that I also removed the word 'much' from 'much time planning'. The phrases 'a lot of' or 'lots of' are often too vague and informal for academic writing. So you might find yourself writing 'much' or 'many' most of the time instead.

Here though, the word 'enough' is better, because it is more specific. Spending 'much' time is great, but how much is 'much'? A student needs to do the *right* amount of planning. That is, *enough* planning to form the structure of their work. Using 'enough' makes the meaning of the phrase clearer.

Is 'the planning process' all that different from just 'planning'? I'd argue that there is no difference. The 'planning' put into an assignment will include some specific processes. Because of this I used the simpler 'planning' and not 'the planning process'.

I also managed to considerably shorten the last phrase – 'finally ensure they are entirely comfortable and confident with the rules of English grammar'.

I removed the word 'finally' because the reader has come to the last point in the sentence – they *know* it is the 'final' point. My reader will see that a new paragraph begins after this sentence. They will understand from this that the subject is changing, or that I am making a different point. For these reasons I do not think it is necessary to label this 'finally'.

I replaced the verb 'ensure' with 'make sure'. I did not *have* to do this. Making this change has actually turned one word into two; as such, it has not made my work more concise. However, 'ensure' sounded a little too forced and formal to me. I don't think it makes a huge difference, but this is the approach I chose

to take. Readers might disagree with me, and the sentence certainly makes sense without this change being made.

This in particular demonstrates quite effectively how writing is about making *choices* as an author. There are certain conventions to follow, but you will always have ultimate control over what goes onto the page.

I made a change to the last part of the sentence. I replaced 'entirely comfortable and confident with the rules of English grammar' with 'confident with grammar'. I removed 'entirely comfortable and confident' simply because I don't think this is true. Not many people ever become 'entirely' confident with English grammar, whether they are studying at university or not.

In fact, a key aim of this book is to help you develop an understanding of the *main* and most important aspects of grammar; the ones you need to write a decent essay or assignment. A fully comprehensive awareness of grammar is not necessary to do this.

Using both 'comfortable' *and* 'confident' is not necessary. It is likely that someone comfortable with a set of rules is confident with them too. There is no benefit, I'd argue, in using both words. I preferred confident, so left that in the sentence.

I removed the word 'English' from 'English grammar'. By getting rid of the reference to a specific language, I made the sentence more versatile. Its key point is broader and more accessible. Surely a writer should be confident with the grammar of whatever language they are working in?

This might seem like a great deal of work to go through to change a short paragraph. In reality, editing the paragraph won't take long – especially as you get used to thinking like this. You'll realise just how quickly you can make meaningful, effective adjustments to your work. One of the aims of this book is to help you develop your skills in this area.

Further reading

Copus, J (2009) *Brilliant Writing Tips for Students*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.