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Developing your academic writing style

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IN THIS SEMINAR...

KEY LEARNING OUTCOME: DEVELOP A CLEAR AND ECONOMICAL ACADEMIC WRITING STYLE

- group reflections on the home exercise & feedback on examples from you
- theory: common mistakes in style, choosing the right style for your text, Orwell's questions to reflect on your writing style & top tips for improving your style
- Demonstrations
 - Ref-N-Write phrase bank
 - Essay -focus on writing style
- Questions and discussion



Home exercise - writing style

Let's share some general comments about the exercise, before looking at examples from you...

- What differentiates an academic from a non-academic style?
- What aspects of writing do you consider when thinking about 'style'?
- Any examples you would like to share from the texts you selected for Part A?
- What are your thoughts on the Part B text?

Your examples - Part A



Seminar 7

Part 1 Academic vs. Non-academic

Institutions are defined in the New Institutional Economics as rules that emerge to solve particular 'transaction' problems. Transactions can broadly describe any social interaction, and rules emerge to govern these interactions, usually with the aim of achieving better results. This is why we have rules for regulating traffic flows to enable faster and safer journeys, rules for organizing firms to clarify who does what, rules for making political decisions about taxing and spending, or rules for organizing the many transactions involved in making long-term investments. However, it soon became clear that the solution to any specific transaction problem depended not only on the specific technical problems and the characteristics of the transacting parties, but also on the broader social context in which the transaction was embedded. The latter determined, amongst other things, the probability that particular rules would be adhered to or enforced. However, the social context is complex, and there were soon many debates on the ways in which the social context mattered, and the most important characteristics of the social context that needed to be captured in an analytical frame to enable institutional analysis to be more useful. This was clearly not just an analytical question but also one of how to interpret complex historical evidence.

I go to the kitchen and make Margot a cup of Night-Night tea, two tablespoons of honey, like Mommy used to make us for bed time. For a second I contemplate adding a splash of whiskey because I saw it on a Victorian show on PBS – the maids would put whiskey in the lady of the manor's hot beverage to calm her nerves. I know Margot drinks at college, but she already has a hangover, and besides, I doubt Daddy would be into it. So I just put the tea, sans whiskey, in my favourite mug, and I send Kitty upstairs with it. I tell her to act adorable. I say she should first give Margot the tea and then snuggle with her for at least five minutes. Which Kitty balks at, because Kitty only cuddles if there's something in it for her, and also because I know it frightens her to see Margot upset.

Comments on these two writing styles

- ✓ Academic writing is much more formal than non-academic style writing.
- ✓ Academic writing tends to avoid using "I".
- ✓ Non-academic writing that I read is from a novel, so it seems like a daily conversation and contains many indirect expressions.
- ✓ The author of academic writing uses various signposting words for the logical order.

Your examples - Part B

Part 2

Q1. What do you think about the writing style in this text?

First of all, the writing style in this text is descriptive by explaining the brief history of British political party. Also, it uses a direct quote to show a clear evidence. This writing style has some different sentence structures, which easily makes it less boring.

Q2. Where do you think this text is included within the book – introduction, middle chapter, conclusion?

This text seems to be included in one of the middle chapters because in the beginning of the text, the word 'This' generally refers to the thing mentioned in the previous paragraph.

Write down your observations using bullet points. You can point out what you like about the writing style, but also if you find any areas of improvement.

Advantages

- Various sentence structures
- Easy to follow

Room to improve

- Some long sentences
- Paraphrasing rather than a direct quote with some evaluation.

This is the story of the most significant new British political party in a generation. New parties are founded all the time, but most are tiny clusters of discontents bound together by a single, marginal issue. Most wither and die very quickly. Others, like the nationalists in Scotland and Wales, have changed the face of politics in their nations, but by its nature their appeal is geographically limited; they could not change the balance of power in Britain as a whole, nor did they aim to do so. This has left the commanding heights of British politics dominated by only three political parties – the Conservatives, the Labour Party and the Liberal Democrats – whose electoral ancestors started taking seats at Westminster a century or more ago. Their individual fortunes may have ebbed and flowed from one election to the next, but together they have reigned supreme. Only once in that time has a new force emerged with sufficient support across the whole of Britain to challenge their monopoly on political power, although even this was not a genuine grassroots insurgency.

Source: Ford and Goodwin, 2014. *Revolt on the right*. London: Routledge

Where does academic style fit in the marking criteria?

Marking Criteria for Dissertations

	Inadequate	Adequate	Fair	Good	Excellent	Outstanding	Exceptional
	1-19: 5 inadequate 1-5 20-29: 4 inadequate 1-5 30-39: 3 inadequate 1-5	40-49: Majority of 1-5 Adequate or higher	50-59: Majority 1-5 Fair or higher	60-69: Majority 1-5 Good or higher	70-79: Majority 1-5 Excellent or higher	80-89: Majority 1-5 Outstanding or higher	90+: Majority 1-5 Exceptional
1. Research Aims & grasp of subject area	Very limited or no grasp of area. Muddled or derivative research aims.	Limited grasp of subject area. Confused or vague research aims.	Some grasp of subject area & reasonable research aims.	Sound grasp of subject area & focused, relevant research aims.	Deep grasp of subject area & originality in main research aims.	Impressive grasp of subject area & highly significant research aims.	Exceptional grasp of subject area; research aims equivalent to journal.
2. Research techniques	Very limited fieldwork or independent research. Little familiarity w/ methods or serious flaws in use.	Limited fieldwork or independent research. Basic familiarity with methods, possibly with errors in application.	Evidence of fieldwork or independent research. Familiarity with application of appropriate methods.	Significant fieldwork or independent research. Clear familiarity with application of appropriate methods.	Substantial fieldwork or independent research. High ability in selection, application & discussion of methods.	Impressive fieldwork or independent research. Innovative selection, application, & discussion of research techniques.	Exceptional form of fieldwork or independent research paired with an expert-level discussion of research techniques.
3. Reading	Very limited or irrelevant reading.	Significant omissions in reading with weak grasp of literature consulted.	Evidence of relevant reading & grasp of literature consulted.	Evidence of plentiful relevant reading & sound grasp of literature.	Extensive reading & thorough grasp of literature consulted.	Impressive review & grasp of relevant literatures.	Expert-level review & innovative synthesis suitable for a journal.
4. Interpretation of evidence	Primarily descriptive analysis; limited, summary discussion of findings.	Limited critical analysis & subsequent discussion of implications.	Reasonable critical analysis & subsequent discussion of implications.	Sound critical analysis & meaningful discussion of implications.	Innovative critical analysis & originality in discussion of implications.	Impressive critical analysis & highly significant discussion of findings.	Critical analysis & subsequent discussion suitable for a journal.
5. Structure & development of argument	Confused, rambling or repetitive structure leading to incoherent argument.	Poor organisation seriously detracts from the development of argument.	Structure sometimes detracts from the development of argument.	Conventional structure with rare digressions occasionally marring the argument.	Logical, coherent structure that persuades of the author's argument.	Innovative structure that enhances the development of argument.	Highly original structure that adds substantially to the development of argument.
6. Writing & communication	Style, grammar & word choice seriously interfere with comprehension. (-3)	Style, grammar & word choice seriously detract from conveying of ideas. (-2)	Style, grammar & word choice sometimes detract from conveying of ideas. (-1)	Style, grammar & word choice rarely detract from conveying of ideas. (0)	Style & word choice show fluency with ideas & flashes of verve. (1)	Style & word choice greatly enhances ideas & demonstrates verve. (2)	Reads as if professionally copy edited. (3)
7. Presentation & references²	Poorly formatted or inappropriate visuals; very limited references. (-3)	Formatting, visuals & referencing seriously distract from argument. (-2)	Formatting, visuals & referencing satisfactory. (-1)	Formatting, visuals & referencing rarely detract from argument. (0)	Formatting, visuals & referencing are impeccable. (1)	Formatting, visuals & referencing actively contribute to argument. (2)	Exceptional presentation with impeccable format & references. (3)

Source: UCL Masters' subject specific marking criteria

Academic style - common mistakes

INFORMAL ENGLISH

Avoid informal words and colloquial phrases in academic writing. Most informal words have equivalents in formal English. For instance, 'good' can be written as 'positive', something 'great' or 'wonderful' can be 'important' and a 'thing' or 'stuff' can be a 'factor' or 'aspect'.

INCORRECT OR MISPLACED SPECIALIST TERMS

Make sure you are familiar with the specialist terms in your area of research and use them correctly. Don't use words just for the sake of using them – terms like 'discourse' for example, have particular meanings in academic literature.

SUBJECTIVE WORDS

Academic writing is based on evidence. Avoid using words that are subjective and can be interpreted in different ways by you or the marker e.g. 'normal'. Don't be apologetic in your tone e.g. 'I did not have time to...'. Avoid trying to tell the reader what to think e.g. 'we should...'. The reader will assess the work based on the evidence and your argumentation.

VAGUE/UNCLEAR WRITING

Try to refrain from using generalisations. Be specific. 'Commentators/scholars/politicians say...' – who, exactly? Be precise in your language and clear about what are you referring to. Avoid using vague references to time and space e.g. 'nowadays...'. Ask yourself whether you can be more precise.

Choose the appropriate style for the right part of your text

DESCRIPTIVE

- Some parts of your writing require a descriptive style.
- e.g. background/context information, describing methods, summarising key findings
- Ensure that it is clear to the marker why what you are describing is relevant.

ARGUMENTATIVE

- Most of your academic writing requires an analytical or argumentative style.
- e.g. when discussing your findings and elaborating on your arguments throughout the writing
- Some descriptive parts are often mixed with analytical elements e.g. in literature reviews

EVALUATIVE

- An evaluative style is required when comparisons are involved.
- e.g. comparing two schools of thought, assessing the merits of different methodologies, comparing the findings from your case studies
- Try to address potential biases by checking the balance of your writing as well as making the evaluation criteria transparent to the reader.

PERSONAL

- In some disciplines and on particular research topics, a personal style can also be used for some parts of writing.
- For example, qualitative work often involves reflecting on researchers' positionality.
- Be conscious about the limitations in generalising your personal experience.

ORWELL'S QUESTIONS

Question your own writing!



Source for questions: Orwell, G. (1984 [1946]). Politics and the English language. London: Penguin Books.

8 practical tips for improving your academic style

1. Different disciplines have developed their own preferred styles. Always check with your tutor if there are any specific style requirements e.g. if there are any rules on personal pronouns use.
2. Find the balance between different styles – which part of your essay is descriptive, which should be more analytical?
3. Avoid contractions e.g. 'don't' and informal language. Highlight the informal language in your work. Think about formal synonyms and re-write those sentences/parts of sentences.
4. Use clear language even when speaking about complex ideas. If there is a shorter word for the longer word you used, use the short one.
5. If you can replace the passive with the active voice, do it! It will also reduce the word count.
6. Use several examples especially when explaining complex concepts and arguments.
7. Vary your sentence structure and avoid repetition.
8. Avoid using jargon or foreign language phrases when there is a simpler English word you can use.

SHORT DEMO: ACADEMIC PHRASEBANKS

- Ref-N-Write is a software that can help improve your academic writing style.
- It has an academic phrasebank for a range of purposes, from how to report statistical data to introductory sentences and useful phrases in literature reviews.
- Some of the phrases are free to view: <https://www.ref-n-write.com/trial/academic-phrasebank/>
- Some universities have free academic phrasebanks for students to use: <http://www.phrasebank.manchester.ac.uk/using-cautious-language/>

LIVE ESSAY MARKING - HOW MARKERS ASSESS YOUR ACADEMIC STYLE

- MA dissertation
- Title: "Reflections on *Dear Amir*: study of literature and film adaptation from an intercultural perspective"
- Focus on the abstract



QUESTIONS & DISCUSSION





Next week

Seminar 8: Originality (with Summer)

An exercise on originality will be sent via email and discussed in the seminar.
Home exercises will be emailed to you every Monday morning – make sure to check your inbox before the Thursday class.