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## Academic style

You will be asked to use academic style, so what does this mean?

**Be formal** Don't write as you speak, **avoid slang** and **common phrases**, e.g. '... it went pear-shaped'. Instead say: '... it started to go wrong' or '... it developed problems'.

Use the **full version of words**: 'have not' instead of 'haven't'.

Always **explain abbreviations** the first time you use them: '... the National Institute for Clinical Health and Excellence (NICE) recommends ...'

**Try to avoid sexist language**: chairperson not chairman.



**Be remote** **Avoid** overusing *I*, *we* or *you* for **personal opinions**: ‘I think that ...’ ‘We believe that ...’ ‘You feel that ...’

This is not useful in an academic essay where you need to back up what you are arguing with evidence from the literature. You can use ‘I’ (the first person) when analysing or commenting on the evidence, perhaps to say how your view differs.

The exception to this is in reflective writing where it is usually acceptable to use ‘I’ or ‘my’. Check your guidelines.

**Don’t ask your reader questions**; they want answers. This writing style is better suited to journalism.

**Be concise** Long-winded explanations usually end up being descriptive. Focus just on the point you are trying to make. Short sentences are OK. Avoid long sentences – if your reader has to backtrack it will just irritate them. Most academic sentences are about 15–20 words long.

**Give definitions** for technical or unusual terms unless your reader is expected to know them. Consider who your audience is.

**Don't generalise** – for example, 'many people'. The following sentence appeared in a student essay: *Economy has played a big part in human existence*. This earned the tutor comment, 'This is excellent waffle!'

**Avoid vague** terms like *nice*, *get* or *thing*.

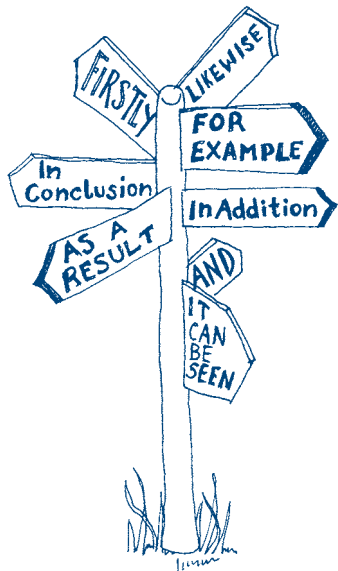
**Be cautious** Say something **may** or **could** happen, *not* that it **will** (unless you can prove it, of course): 'This suggests ...' or 'This indicates ...'

Researchers are usually tentative when reporting their findings because research rarely proves something absolutely. So it is better to say that the research *shows*, *suggests* or *indicates* rather than it *proved* something.

## Using 'signal' words

Using 'signal' words in your essay signposts your reader through the different sections and gives them a constant stream of clues to follow. If you leave these clues out your reader may struggle to follow your train of thought. They may get confused and won't reward you with the marks your work really deserves.

Smooth things over by using words that signal clearly what you are doing.



## Signal words explained

Signal word(s)	Purpose	Alternative words
<b>Firstly, secondly, thirdly ...</b>	Show order of points made	in addition, next, then, to start/begin with, initially, additionally, lastly, moreover, subsequently, finally, previously
<b>and ...</b>	Adding extra points	also, and, in addition, then, again, furthermore, with regard to
<b>for example ...</b>	Introducing examples	for instance, in other words, including, the following, these include, that is, this demonstrates, such as, to illustrate this, namely
<b>another view</b>	Show other views/opinions	in contrast, although, on the other hand, yet, alternatively, but, on the contrary, despite, conversely, whereas, even so, otherwise, however
<b>as a result ...</b>	Show the results or effect of something	therefore, as a result, so, thus, due to, consequently, because of this, it can be seen, the evidence shows, hence, this suggests, the implication is, one result is, as, inevitably

## More signal words explained

Signal word(s)	Purpose	Alternative words
<b>emphasise</b>	To stress a point	obviously, definitely, undeniably, inevitably, generally, admittedly, especially, clearly, importantly, in fact, indeed, in particular
<b>exceptions</b>	To show exceptions	however, in spite of, yet, nevertheless
<b>equally</b>	To show similarity	similarly, likewise, as well as, correspondingly, in the same way, also, just as
<b>to compare</b>	To compare with something else	just like, same as, similar to, not only ... but also, compared to/with
<b>another cause</b>	To show cause(s)	due to, because, another ..., since, first, second
<b>to conclude</b>	To sum up points so far	In conclusion, to conclude, to sum up, to summarise, so, overall, consequently, as discussed, as has been shown



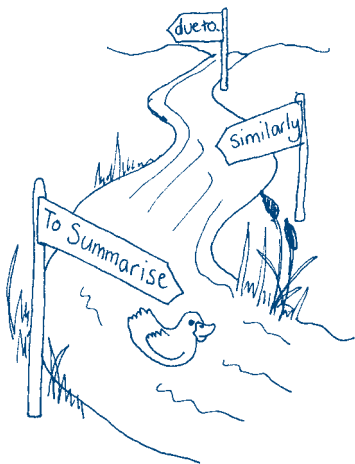
Take **care with** *however*. It can be useful to signal a change of direction in your argument, but it is overused by students.

## Making it flow – use signposts

Many students cram their essays with facts and references but fail to explain the relevance of these. If you do this you are making your tutor do the job of trying to work out where you are going with your argument. Make your essay easy to read by using a few simple tricks to lead your tutor gently to your conclusion and you will be rewarded with those vital extra marks. As a bonus you may even need to do less research overall.

### Simple tricks to make your essay flow

- 1 Use signposting through the essay.
- 2 Use paragraphs (see paragraph plan, **p. 35** and essay diamond, **p. 29**).
- 3 Use signal words to 'signpost' your essay (see **p. 91**).
- 4 Outline your essay structure clearly in the introduction (see **p. 42**).
- 5 Make sure your conclusion 'mirrors' your introduction (see **p. 49**).
- 6 Refer to the title in the last sentence of the essay.



## Problem solving

### Too long: over word or page count

Resolve to work to your word count next time ( **see p. 20** ). Time was wasted on researching and writing and now more time is needed to chop your work back, so double trouble. But for now look for and mark where:

- ▶ information is **repeated**; choose the best example and cut the rest out. This is hard to do as by now you love it, but just do it!
- ▶ more than one example is given – will one do? (Yes, usually!)
- ▶ **part** of your essay **does not seem to fit in**. If it does not argue towards your conclusion it may be irrelevant (unless it is a counter-argument you are dismissing). Consider cutting it out.
- ▶ you have gone **off track** or into too much detail. Are you **‘waffling’** and not developing your point? Check the paragraph plan ( **see p. 35** ).
- ▶ you have **quoted**. If you quote, have you also commented on what you think is important or special about the quote? A quote can’t stand by itself. Use paraphrasing and summarising – this uses fewer words and because they are your own words it shows your understanding.

## Too short: under word or page count

- ▶ **Analyse your question** ( p. 23 ), recheck any information and learning outcomes. Is there anything you need to develop further?
- ▶ Check that **every paragraph** follows the **paragraph plan** ( p. 35 ).
- ▶ Ensure you have a strong **introduction** and **conclusion**. These are vital for your reader to understand your work ( p. 38 ).

## Always proofread your work

Read the following tutor's comment on a student essay. After you finish laughing, remember this is from a real student essay.

*Tutor comment:* '... note the difference between phatic and phallic ... might lead to embarrassment!'

You may not have made an embarrassing error in your essay but you will have made errors that you found hard to spot.

Try:

- ▶ Reading your work out loud. Use text-to-voice software like textHELP if you have access to it. This is especially useful for dyslexic students.
- ▶ Ask someone with good English to read it. They do not have to be a subject specialist; if you have written it well they will understand it.



Leave your work for a few days and then read it through. This allows your memory of it to die back so you read what you actually wrote, not what you thought you wrote. A good reason to finish early!

**And finally:** check and **double-check** your **references**.

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