

Writing Right

Introduction to Academic Writing: Writing with Clarity of Purpose and Voice in an Essay

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Variety's the very spice of life. That gives it all its flavour.
– William Cowper

The writer's purpose and voice affect the stance that is taken in an essay. This stance refers to the implicit relationship between the writer and both the readers and the subject. Without a clear purpose, the writer's stand is not obvious and may confuse the reader. If the writer is unclear about his or her own stand and continuously references other authors, then a reader may not know what the writer's own opinion or argument is.

In a formal academic essay assignment, there would be certain expectations laid out clearly in the course outline. In thinking about the style and level of formality that you wish to use, it would be ideal to take reference from the course guidelines and requirements.

Once you have determined the purpose of the essay and decided on a certain style and stance, it should be clearly established in the early stages of the essay and remain consistent throughout the paper.

Writing with Clarity of Purpose and Voice in an Essay

Learning Outcomes

At the end of this section, you should be able to:

- Write an essay with an appropriate level of formality
 - Write with clarity and conciseness so that the thesis can be easily understood
 - Identify one's own style and allow one's voice to come through the essay
-

Reading and analysing different paragraphs which have varying levels of formality

Formal tone	Informal tone
<p>Motivational strategies can be divided into two main categories. The first is extrinsic motivation, which is concerned with external factors outside the activity itself, that affect one's behaviour. The second is intrinsic motivation, which is focused on the individual finding significance and worth in the activity itself. The challenge for managers is not only to motivate the unmotivated employees but also to know how to progress from extrinsic to intrinsic motivational methods such that the latter becomes firmly established and ingrained in the employees' set of beliefs. This essay will investigate six motivational strategies and discuss how both extrinsic and intrinsic motivation play a role in management. It will conclude with demonstrating how intrinsic motivation is more important and enduring.</p>	<p>There are two types of motivation: Extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. If you are extrinsically motivated, then you might be affected by external factors other than the activity itself. If you are intrinsically motivated, then you would find the activity itself significant and worthwhile. Managers should know how to motivate their unmotivated employees and make them intrinsically motivated. It has to become part of the employees' set of beliefs. In this essay, I'll look at six motivational strategies and show how both extrinsic and intrinsic motivation are important in management. I'll conclude by showing how intrinsic motivation is more important and lasting.</p>

The formal tone establishes some distance between the writer and the reader while the informal tone attempts to draw a direct connection with the reader. This is done by using 'you' and 'I' which addresses the reader directly and injects the writer into the essay through first-person perspectives.

The table below shows a few more aspects that may affect the level of formality in the writing.

Formal tone	Examples	Informal tone	Examples
The use of specialised language which certain professions or groups may understand but not others	<i>Teachers could develop greater pedagogical awareness to build a repertoire of teaching skills.</i>	The language used is common and easy to understand	<i>Teachers could learn ways to engage their students and use a range of teaching methods.</i>
The use of formal referencing styles and academic conventions	<i>Ong (2022) opined that formative assessments were fundamental to learning.</i>	The writing is casual and relaxed	<i>Ong said that formative assessments were important to learning.</i>
Time and effort are used to provide relevant background for the general reader	<i>Formative assessments involve teachers using assessments for learning. Teachers provide critical feedback for students to reflect and improve on their learning. The focus is on the process of learning as opposed to the final product.</i>	Key points are delivered with the assumption that the reader knows and understands the relevant background	<i>Formative assessments focus on the process of learning while summative assessments focus on the final product.</i>
Use of formal vocabulary without colloquial language and contractions	<i>Teachers may nurture a culture of learning from one's mistakes by designing meaningful reflective activities.</i>	The writing may contain informal words (e.g. really fast) and colloquialism (e.g. the food is first-class). It may also use contractions (e.g. I'll, won't).	Reflection can really be useful for students as they'll improve much faster that way.

Note: The table above does not suggest that all writing falls neatly within the boxes or columns. There is a place for both formal and informal tones depending on the purpose of the writing.

Writers may choose to adapt and mix the different aspects to establish their own style and stance for a given essay. For example, the writer may choose to use simple language that is straightforward and easy to understand. However, to help the reader to know where the information is taken from, the writer provides formal references and follows established academic conventions. In key areas, when the writer feels that there is a need to, he or she spends time providing substantial background for the general reader. Otherwise, the writer assumes that the reader is knowledgeable about the subject.

Depending on the purpose, a writer may select a suitable style and stance. Regardless of the eventual choice, however, it should be clearly demonstrated in the early stages of the essay and remain consistent throughout the paper.

Editing sample paragraphs by reducing redundancies and passive voice to make the writing concise

In this section, we look at removing words that do not add value to our sentences. When we speak casually with our friends, we may use additional words or sounds in our speech. This may provide us time to think about a response, convey a sense of familiarity or even just to break the ice and establish a more informal setting. However, in academic writing, there is a need for clear, concise, and coherent passages.

Here is a useful acronym to keep in mind (**P.U.R.E**)

- **Purpose.** Why do I need this sentence?
- **Underline** the prepositions (e.g. in, about, for, into, of) and ask if they are needed
- **Remove** words that do not add meaning to the sentence
- **Energize** the sentence with active voice (where appropriate)

Original sentences/phrases	Revised sentences/phrases
The point that I am making here is that everyone has a part to play in terms of saving the environment.	Everyone has a part to play in saving the environment.
There may be an increased chance for some authors, whenever they feel some level of hesitancy, to add in additional phrases to cover up the fact that the purpose of the sentence is not clear.	Some hesitant authors may use additional phrases because the purpose of the sentence is not clear.
Plastics are said by many researchers to cause high levels of pollution in the water.	Many researchers say plastics cause high levels of water pollution.
It was Lincoln who said that...	Lincoln said...

Analysing and thinking about one’s own writing style and allowing one’s own voice to come through

Everyone has a unique writing style. We have different ways of expressing ourselves in the written form. By analysing and thinking about our own writing style, we can identify ways to improve and allow our voice and perspective to be clearer.

The table below shows a few steps that we can take to analyse our writing style.

Item	Brief description	Method
Length of sentences	<p>It is useful to vary the length of the sentences throughout the essay. Too many long or short sentences clumped together may bore the reader.</p> <p>In general, short sentences are useful for making an impactful statement. Longer sentences are useful for summarising key points or providing evidence.</p>	<p>Count the number of words in each sentence and list them out.</p> <p>Does a paragraph have too many long or short sentences?</p> <p>What is the average length of the sentences?</p> <p><i>Note that there is no fixed rule for the length of sentences. This is a general guide to vary the length of sentences.</i></p>
Variety in sentence structures	<p>As with the length of sentences, too many of the same type of sentence structures may bore the reader. If there are too many simple sentences, the writing may seem abrupt and choppy. However, too many complex and compound sentences may also make the writing unnecessarily complicated.</p> <p>Therefore, a balance between simple, compound, and complex sentences is ideal.</p>	<p>List the structure of the sentences in the essay.</p> <p>S: Simple sentences Cx: Complex sentences Cd: Compound sentences</p> <p>If a paragraph has too many of one type of sentences, then you may consider adding more variety to the sentence structures.</p>
Confidence in your position	<p>While authors can demonstrate caution in making certain claims, too much hedging language may indicate that the author lacks confidence in taking any position.</p> <p>It is also ideal to provide references when other author’s arguments and ideas are used. However, this should not come at the expense of the author’s own voice and argument.</p>	<p>Note the number of times when you have used hedging language.</p> <p>Note the number of references within each paragraph.</p> <p>Ask if you have made your own position and argument clear. If the essay only presents the arguments of other authors, then the author’s voice risks being drowned out.</p>

To summarise this section, the key word is balance. If there are too many short or long sentences, the reader may get bored. Likewise, if the author has provided too many references without his or her own voice coming through, then the strength of the thesis and the author's voice is affected. To paraphrase William Cowper, '*variety is the spice of writing. It gives it much flavour*'.

Topic Review and Exercises

Analysing and editing sample paragraphs to modify the level of formality

Exercise 1

The paragraphs below have been written in an informal tone that is inappropriate for an academic assignment essay. Rewrite the sentences to improve the tone and level of formality.

1a. For example, the doctor will have to accurately identify the issue that has been raised by the patient. After that, you must collect all the necessary information from as many different types of sources as possible. I think that this allows us to see the issue from different points of view. Finally, based on all these different facts and types of information, we can come to a conclusion and share it with other people effectively.

Revised paragraph

1b. Throughout the months, John should feel more comfortable after the ice has broken with the counsellor. John should then open up and share more about what he really feels inside. But is this enough? Is the problem really solved? He may feel more comfortable with the counsellor, but the real problem has not been dealt with because he may not be comfortable with himself and his own problems.

Revised paragraph

Suggested response to Exercise 1

1a. For example, doctors have to accurately identify the issue raised by the patient. They source for all the necessary information from various types of sources. This allows them to analyse the issue from alternative perspectives. Based on the analysis and evaluation of the facts, the doctor can come to an informed conclusion and share it with the patient effectively.

In this revised paragraph, the pronouns 'you', 'I', and 'us' have been replaced with the specific group of people concerned. The author adopts a consistent voice and avoids first-person and second-person pronouns.

1b. After spending a few months with the counsellor, John should feel more comfortable with him. He might share his innermost feelings, which could alleviate his discomfort. However, the underlying issues may remain unaddressed as he may not have come to terms with his own problems.

In this revised paragraph, the repetitive 'John should' has been replaced. Certain informal phrases such as 'ice has broken' and 'really feels' have also been revised. Rhetorical questions tend to add to the informality of the writing and should generally be avoided in academic writing.

Editing sample paragraphs to make the writing concise

Exercise 2

The following paragraphs contain excessive words and phrases. Try to edit each sentence for conciseness using the P.U.R.E. method.

- **Purpose.** Why do I need this sentence?
- **Underline** the prepositions (e.g. in, about, for, into, of) and ask if they are needed
- **Remove** words that do not add meaning to the sentence
- **Energize** the sentence with active voice (where appropriate)

Original sentence	Revised sentence
After spending a considerable amount of time in the library, the author has to decide whether or not there is really enough evidence to support the thesis.	
At this point in time, it would be useful to review all the various aspects of the material and come to a conclusion.	
The essay can be written once the author has sufficient evidence to support the thesis.	

Suggested responses for Exercise 2

Original sentence	Questions for consideration	Suggested revision
<p>After spending a considerable amount of time in the library, the author has to decide whether or not there is really enough evidence to support the thesis.</p>	<p><i>Is it important to say that the researcher has spent a 'considerable amount of time in the library'? If not, it can be omitted or revised to provide specific details.</i></p> <p><i>Can the phrase 'whether or not' be shortened?</i></p> <p><i>Is the phrase 'there is really enough evidence' too informal?</i></p>	<p>After his research, the author should evaluate if there is sufficient evidence to support his thesis.</p>
<p>At this point in time, it would be useful to review all the various aspects of the material and come to a conclusion.</p>	<p><i>Can the phrase 'At this point in time' be shortened or omitted?</i></p> <p><i>What is the purpose of writing 'it would be useful'?</i></p> <p><i>Can the phrase 'come to a conclusion' be shortened?</i></p>	<p>The author could review the different perspectives of his research and conclude if the thesis is valid.</p>
<p>The essay can be written once the author has sufficient evidence to support the thesis.</p>	<p><i>Would this sentence in passive voice be better in active voice?</i></p>	<p>The author can write the essay if he has sufficient evidence to support his thesis.</p>

Exercise 3

Look at the phrases in the left column and try to edit them for conciseness.

Original phrase	Revised word/phrase
Think about it again	
Whether or not	
This is due to the fact of	
To have the hope of	
He wanted to make an inquiry	
The thesis was considered to be valid.	
It was actually Einstein who said that	
I really believe that the thesis is strong	
It is widely supported by researchers that...	
The results will be published in the journal by the authors.	

Suggested responses for Exercise 3

Original phrase	Revised word/phrase
Think about it again	reconsider
Whether or not	If
This is due to the fact of	Because
To have the hope of	To hope
He wanted to make an inquiry	He wanted to inquire
The thesis was considered to be valid.	The thesis was valid.
It was actually Einstein who said that	Einstein said
I really believe that the thesis is strong	As the evidence shows, it is a well-supported thesis
It is widely supported by researchers that...	Researchers widely support ...
The results will be published in the journal by the authors.	The authors will publish the results in the journal.

Further reading

Achieving flow in an essay

- <https://slc.berkeley.edu/writing-worksheets-and-other-writing-resources/making-connections-between-sections-your-argument>

Writing with clarity and purpose

- https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/academic_writing/paramedic_method.html

General resources for writing

- <https://writingcenter.fas.harvard.edu/pages/moving-assignment-topic>
- <https://advice.writing.utoronto.ca>
- Gawande, A. (2010). *The Checklist Manifesto: How to Get Things Right*. Picador.

For more resources on Academic Writing or English Language support,
you may scan the QR code below.



<https://www.suss.edu.sg/academic-research-writing-resources>

Published by Singapore University of Social Sciences

Publication date December 2022

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