

General

You need a formal, academic style for writing at university. For this, you need to think about two things;

grammar vocabulary

Grammar;

Use the following;

3rd person

This is the grammar name for **he/she/it/they**¹. Use it most of the time. However, you can sometimes use the 1st person (I/we/my etc) especially in introductions. Never use the 2nd person (you) as it is too informal.

Some passives

You usually use the **active**² in most speaking and writing, including academic. However, sometimes the **passive**³ can be useful, as it puts the focus on a thing not a person, but don't use it too much.

Few/no direct questions

Direct questions are not common in academic writing. You should use indirect questions instead, using **questions verbs**⁴, (eg question/ask/ argue/debate) or **adjectives**⁵ (eg arguable/ debateable) or **nouns**⁶ (eg argument/debate).

Some complex sentences

In most speaking and writing, you use mainly **simple and compound sentences**⁷. For academic writing, use these too, but also use some **complex sentences**⁸. See other units for linking words that can make writing more complex.

Long form

When you speak, you put words together, like 'it's' and 'we're', called the short form. To be more formal, you use the long form instead, so "it is" and "we are".

(NB headings in brackets show that this grammar is also used in formal writing)

Grammar

Less formal

1st, 2nd person

I/we, you

I think the government should improve housing.

You should research your competition.

(Active)

We **should ban**² smoking.

Direct questions

Is the United Nations necessary?

(Simple/compound)

The United Nations was established after World War Two⁷. This war had caused huge suffering⁷. The organisation aims to bring peace and justice round the world. It sometimes fails in its task. For example, it cannot force countries to accept its resolutions. This is because it has only limited powers⁷. Some people feel that the UN needs more military powers. Others argue that this would damage its main aim.

Short form

it's/there's/won't

More formal

3rd person

He/she/it/they

An **expert**¹ in this field, **Dr Smith**¹ ...
Research¹ shows...
This¹ proves...
Supporters¹ of the law argue...

The government¹ should improve housing.

Many people¹ believe the government should improve housing.

Housing¹ should be improved.³

It¹ is advisable to research **the competition**.¹

Passive

Smoking **should be banned**.³

Indirect questions

We need to **ask**⁴ if the United Nations is necessary.

It is **debateable**⁵ whether the United Nations is necessary.

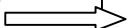
There is some **debate**⁶ over the need for the United Nations.

Complex

The United Nations was established after World War Two, **which** had caused huge suffering⁸. **Despite** the organisation's aim to bring peace and justice round the world, it sometimes fails in its task. For example, it cannot force countries to accept its resolutions, **having** only limited powers⁸. Some people feel that the UN needs more military powers **but** others argue that this would damage its main aim.

Long form

it is/ there is/will not



Vocabulary;

Adverbs¹

These add information to verbs and adjectives, how much, how often etc. They make writing appear more accurate and balanced.

Soft verbs²

These are verbs like can, may, might, would, seem and appear. They also make writing appear balanced, especially when things are not 100% true facts.

Word type

Most words in English aren't formal or informal. They're both. However, sometimes there can be more formal versions. For example, two/three word verbs³ (phrasal verbs) often have a more formal, one word⁴ version.

Also, don't use very strong, emotional words⁵. To express strong opinions, you should use more objective words⁶, or use a negative/positive pattern⁷.

Abstract nouns

These are theories/ideas, things that you can't actually touch.⁸ Academic writing is full of them because you often describe the situation or problem in an abstract, general way, then give actual, real examples⁹ (think of the structure of paragraphs). Abstract nouns are often uncountable.

Linking¹⁰ words

Linking words show the relationship between information – contrast, cause and effect etc. Try and use a range of different ones, because this adds variety. This variety is an important part of academic style.

Remember to also use other types of linking words, (such as relative pronouns, conditionals) that you studied in complexity

Vocabulary

Less formal

More formal

Adverbs

Costs increased in 1998.

Costs increased dramatically¹ in 1998.

The test was difficult.

The test was extremely¹ difficult.

Smoking causes cancer.

Smoking sometimes¹ causes cancer.

Smoking possibly¹ causes cancer.

Soft verbs

Smoking kills.

Smoking can² kill.

This is a good idea.

This might² be a good idea.

This evidence is weak.

This evidence seems² weak.

This is the answer.

This would appear² to be the answer.

Word type

He came in³.

He entered⁴.

They put up with³ the situation.

They tolerated⁴ the situation.

War is evil⁵.

War is immoral⁶/never justified⁷.

He is stupid⁵.

He is not very intelligent⁷.

He lacks intelligence⁷.

Abstract nouns

Regulation⁸ was a typical problem. Laws⁹ had been passed in a hurry and the police⁹ did not have enough resources.

Traffic control⁸ was one area of improvement. Bus lanes⁹ were established, certain roads⁹ were redesigned, and car sharing⁹ encouraged, all resulting in a 16% reduction in the number of vehicles on the roads⁹ (Matthews, 2005).

Linking words

He studied hard but¹⁰ he failed the exam.

He studied hard. However¹⁰, he failed the exam.

Although¹⁰ he studied hard, he failed the exam.

Despite¹⁰ studying hard, he failed the exam.