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SEMINAR 7 NOTES: ACADEMIC WRITING STYLE

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Key learning outcome: developing a clear and economical writing style for your essays and dissertations

Writing style: home exercise reflection

- Some questions to get you started...
  - What differentiates an academic from a non-academic style?
  - What aspects of writing do you consider when thinking about 'style'?
  - What challenges do you face in developing your academic writing style?
    - **Extra exercise**: Reflect on the style of a few readings in your area. Is there a specific style that scholars follow in your field? If there is a variety of styles, can you find the differences and the reasons why style may sometimes differ?

Common style mistakes in student writing

Tip: Always check the marking criteria for your assignment and reflect on how the writing style will be assessed. Are there any specific style guidelines for your assignment?

- **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'.

- **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.

- **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.

- **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.

Reflection: Can you think of other examples of aspects that can be improved in academic writing, either based on your own or others' writing? Write down these thoughts and think about potential solutions to improve the aspects you identify.

"Never use a long word where a short one will do." (George Orwell)

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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.

- **Analytical/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.

Reflect on your own writing with Orwell's questions!

1. **"What am I trying to say?**" - decide on your content
2. **"What words will express it?"** - decide on the style
3. **"Could I put it more shortly?"** - adopt an economical style
4. **"Have I said anything that is avoidably ugly?"** - make sure your style is clear and also enjoyable to read

A good exercise to develop your writing style and also your critical thinking more broadly is to ask those questions when you read academic texts. Even articles in top journals can be improved sometimes in terms of their style!

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.

Live demonstrations

In this seminar, we had a brief look at Ref-N-Write, a writing software containing a useful academic phrasebank. We then analysed the writing style in a MA dissertation and discussed suggestions to improve different aspects of style, such as clarity, the use of passive vs. active voice and the variety in sentence structures.

Useful resource box

- Ref-N-Write phrasebank: https://www.ref-n-write.com/trial/academic-phrasebank/
- University of Manchester phrasebank: http://www.phrasebank.manchester.ac.uk/
- On storytelling techniques in particular, see: Sword, H. (2012). Stylish Academic Writing. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Pinker, S. (2015). The Sense of Style: the thinking person's guide to writing in the 21st century. London: Penguin.
- For Humanities students: Hayot, E. (2014). The elements of academic style: writing for the humanities. Columbia University Press.
- Pages 307-339 on developing your academic style from Cottrell, S. (2013) The Study Skills Handbook. 4th ed. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.