

Academic Writing: Some Basic “Dos and Don’ts”

The following list of “dos and don’ts” for academic writing is a general list of recommendations. These rules will not apply equally across the disciplines or even from class to class within the same discipline.

When in doubt, you should always check with your professor, ask someone in the department if there are writing guidelines available for students in your department, or check the style of a respected journal in your field.

The “Dos”

Write in a clear, “plain” style. Avoid “flowery” language at all costs! If necessary, throw out your Thesaurus! Readers are more impressed by the quality of your ideas than your use of multi-syllabic terms.

Exception: when appropriate, use jargon common in your field.

Use active voice. Put your verbs to work for you and use direct, clear sentences.

Vary your sentence structure. Readers get tired when they read a series of lengthy sentences with multiple clauses. Similarly, they feel rushed by a series of short, terse sentences. As much as possible, vary the length and construction of your sentences.

Use consistent tenses. Present tense is most common in academic papers, and should be used when referring to written texts. Future tense is almost never used.

Exception: past tense is used in history papers and in reference to experiments done in the past.

Have someone else read your paper before you turn it in! All writers get very involved in their own ideas and need an outside reader to provide feedback.

The “Don’ts”

Don’t use first person pronouns ("I", "we," "me," "us," "my," and "our"). Most readers know who is writing the paper, so you do not ever have to refer to yourself.

Exceptions: some academic writing requires the use of first-person pronouns: reflection papers, ethnographic studies, etc.

Tip: Never use the word “you”!

Do not use contractions. This rule is stylistic and the goal is a “cleaner” paper. There are many exceptions to this rule and the best thing to do is check with the professor.

Tip: “cannot” is one word and “a lot” is two words!

Don’t use archaic terms. “Thus” and “alas” are not terms utilized in common English and should not be used in your academic paper!

Don’t use slang. Though academic writing should use common English terms, it is not casual writing.

Don’t use clichés. Be careful – clichés are easy to use. For example, “too little, too late” seems full of meaning, but it is considered vague and cliché in an academic paper.

Don’t use qualifiers (“really,” “very,” “surely,” “often,” “hopefully,” “basically,” etc.). These terms make your paper sound unsure and tentative. Delete these words for a stronger, more direct paper.

Avoid overused “scholarly” phrases. Never write “In this paper I will ...” You are writing the paper and will clearly do something. There’s no need to say you will do something – just do it!

And never write “In conclusion ...” This is an overused transition to the conclusion. The reader should know they are at the conclusion of your paper based on the content of the concluding paragraph.