ACE Quick Guide to Formal Academic Style

Using a formal academic style helps **to clearly and effectively communicate ideas,** ensuring work sounds **professional, reliable**, **objective**, and is **easily understood** by the wider academic community (University of York, 2025).

The key principles of writing in a formal, academic style are outlined below:

1. Write in the 3rd person

Adopting the third person directs attention from the author and onto the arguments, facts, and scholarly research being presented. It involves **conveying information objectively** and **without the use of personal pronouns** such as 'I', 'we' and 'you'.

✘ **Incorrect**: I found the participants preferred face to face interactions over virtual communication.

✔ **Correct**: Participants demonstrated a preference for face-to-face interactions over virtual communication.

2. Avoid using colloquialisms and idiomatic phrases

The term '**colloquialism**' describes **casual language**, **words**, and **phrases** typically used in **everyday conversation**. **Idiomatic phrases** are those with **non-literal or culturally established meanings**. The table below includes examples of both colloquialisms and idiomatic phrases:

Boss	Newbie	Job
Massive	Loads / Lots	Basically
Cut corners	Drop in the ocean	On the same page
At the end of the day	Touch base	Outside the box
Drill down	In the pipeline	Stumbling block

QA

3. Avoid using contractions

Contractions are **shortened forms of phrases** whereby **two words are combined** and certain **letters omitted**, **replaced with an apostrophe.** Whilst it may seem appealing to utilise contractions to reserve word-count, they are informal and **must therefore be avoided** in scholarly assignments.

❌	✔️
Don't	**Do not**
Won't	**Will not**
Shouldn't	**Should not**
Can't	**Cannot**
Aren't	**Are not**
There's	**There is**

4. Avoid using question forms

These are **sentences written as questions** as opposed to statements, **frequently used in persuasive writing** to provoke thought and engage the reader. However, in academic writing, question forms are deemed **informal, vague**, and **rhetorical, weakening authority**. As such, statements must be used to convey arguments effectively.

❌ **Incorrect**: Why is it important for managers to adopt an appropriate leadership style?

✔️ **Correct**: Adopting appropriate leadership styles in management can enhance employee motivation, improve organisational performance, and support effective decision-making.

QA

5. Use single-word verbs instead of multi-word verbs

Single-word verbs, as opposed to multi-word verbs, **are considered preferable in academic writing** as they convey a more formal and objective tone.

❌	✔️	❌	✔️
Build up	**Accumulate**	Pick out	**Identify**
Get hold of	**Acquire**	Show	**Illustrate**
Give out	**Allocate**	Go up	**Increase**
Find out	**Ascertain**	Bring together	**Integrate**
Put together	**Combine**	Stay the same	**Maintain**
Put together	**Compile**	Change up	**Modify**
Finish off	**Complete**	Take place	**Occur**
Decide that	**Conclude**	Leave out	**Omit**
Carry out	**Conduct**	Sort out / Set up	**Organise**
Made up of	**Consist**	Lay out	**Outline**
Carry on	**Continue**	Take part	**Participate**
Break down	**Deconstruct**	Put off	**Postpone**
Go down	**Decrease**	Come before	**Precede**
Lay out	**Delineate**	Get ready	**Prepare**
Find out	**Detect**	Put forward	**Present**
Figure out	**Determine**	Come up with	**Produce**
Tell apart	**Distinguish**	Put forward	**Propose**
Use	**Employ**	Pick up on	**Recognise**
Make sure	**Ensure**	Take out / Get rid	**Remove**
Find out / Set up	**Establish**	Hold on to / Keep	**Retain**
Look into	**Examine**	Backs up	**Support**
Come up with	**Generate**	Make use of	**Utilise**

6. Use precise, specific, and well-chosen language

Academic writing requires a **high level of detail** and **specificity**, integrating **relevant facts**, **statistics** and **discipline-specific vocabulary**. It is important to **make deliberate linguistic choices** to prevent misinterpretation and ambiguity. **Scholarly resources** and **internal company evidence** should also be provided through citations and appendix items where possible.

❌ **Incorrect**: Many employees struggle with online training, so it is worth doing more face-to-face training instead.

✔️ **Correct**: In a survey of 213 employees, 62% reported difficulty maintaining concentration when completing mandatory training online (Appendix A). Soady et al. (2025) suggest a hybrid model, including both online and face-to-face training, increases engagement and facilitates better applications of learning to the workplace.

7. Avoid using emotive and dramatic language

Emotive and dramatic language should be avoided in academic writing as it **signals bias** and **exaggerates claims**, thereby **replacing evidence with feelings** and **reducing objectivity.** The table below includes both examples of emotive and dramatic language and suitable, objective alternatives:

❌	✔️
Shocking	**Unexpected**
Devastating effects	**Adverse effects**
Disastrous outcomes	**Negative outcomes**
Alarming trend	**Emerging trend**
Deeply concerning	**Raises concerns**
Blatant failure	**Significant limitation**
Astonishing results	**Significant results**

8. Use cautious language

Cautious language, also known as hedging, is used **to distinguish between facts and claims** and to **express varying degrees of uncertainty**.

Making bold, unsubstantiated assertions reduces the credibility of your writing. Using more cautious hedging language can therefore make your writing appear **reliable, well-informed**, and **scholarly.**

For more information, please see the ACE Quick Guide to Hedging.

❌	✔️
The intervention **will** increase employee engagement.	The intervention **may** increase employee engagement.
The data **shows** an authoritarian leadership style impacts team cohesion.	The data **suggests** an authoritarian leadership style **can** impact team cohesion.
Policy changes **undoubtedly** impacted employee outcomes.	**It appears** policy changes **may have** impacted employee outcomes.
Research **proves** a four-day working week increases employee productivity.	Research **indicates** a four-day working week **could** increase employee productivity.

You do **not** need to use hedging language if you are:

- **Stating established facts**

For example: Employees are legally protected from discrimination under the *Equality Act 2010.*

- **Describing methods or processes used**

For example: Participants completed a 20-question survey.

QA

9. Avoid writing lengthy sentences containing unnecessary filler words and phrases

In academic writing, you should express your point clearly and succinctly, using as few words as possible. This means **avoiding writing lengthy sentences** containing **unnecessary filler words and phrases** that attempt to **convey more than one central point.**

❌ **Incorrect**: It is important to note that leadership plays a very significant role in the overall success of organisations in today's modern business environment and in my opinion, effective leadership is basically about being able to motivate and inspire employees in order to achieve organisational goals and objectives.

✅ **Correct**: Leadership plays a significant role in an organisation's success. Effective leadership motivates and inspires employees to achieve organisational goals and objectives.

Common unnecessary words	Common unnecessary phrases
totally, completely, surprisingly	In my opinion... As to whether....
absolutely, definitely, certainly	It is important to note... Due to the fact...
actually, basically, virtually, truly	In order to... In spite of the fact...
extremely, simply, clearly	In the event that... It goes to show...
notably, interestingly	It is possible that... For the purpose of...
fairly, quite, very, just	In terms of... Has the ability to...

Alternatives to common unnecessary phrases	
Due to the fact the meeting was cancelled...	**As** the meeting was cancelled...
As to whether the company decides...	**Whether** the company decides...
In the event that the deadline is not met...	**If** the deadline is not met...
In order to understand the impact of...	**To** understand the impact of...
In spite of the fact **that...**	**Despite** the fact...

QA

Reference List

University of York (2025) *Formal Language.* Available at:
https://subjectguides.york.ac.uk/academic-language/formal (Accessed: 23 February 2026).

Additional Resources

The ACE Academic Writing Essentials Quick Guide outlines the key principles of academic writing.

The ACE Academic Style Video Guide explores six conventions of writing in an academic style.

The ACE Quick Guide to Writing Concisely demonstrates how to effectively communicate information in as few words as possible to help maximise the value of limited word count.

The ACE Quick Guide to Hedging features guidance on how to use cautious language in academic writing to formulate more precise and academically credible arguments.

QA

Learn. To Change.