

Academic Style

The most important characteristic of academic language, spoken or written, is that it attempts to tell the truth. This does not mean that everything written by academics is true, but it does mean that any attempt to hide or distort the truth is, by definition, not academic. Any academic statement must be based on an honest attempt to find the facts by research and then to analyse those facts.

Stating the facts precisely

Academic language states the facts precisely and shows where the information came from. Imprecise or vague language is not academic. Compare these statements:

1. It is always raining in England.
2. It rains a lot in England.
3. Average annual rainfall in England is between 750 and 1000 millimetres (UK Met Office 2010).

The first sentence is wrong. It claims that it rains 24 hours a day 365 days a year in England. Such statements are normal in informal, especially spoken, language and are understood to be exaggerations. However, in academic writing such statements are not acceptable.

The second sentence is far too vague. How much is 'a lot'? For someone who lives in a desert country, any rain may be a lot.

The third sentence is academic because it states how much rain falls in England and indicates that the figures refer to an annual average. It also uses a citation to show where the information came from. Although the sentence is clear and precise it could be improved by stating the exact years it refers to.

Stating the facts clearly

Academic language is also clear and succinct. It may not always appear so because it may be explaining complex ideas. However, the use of long, difficult sentences is not a necessary part of academic style. Consider these sentences:

1. The domestic orb proceeds about the solar body from nadir to apogee in manner consequent upon its elliptical trajectory.
2. The earth goes round the sun but not in a circle.
3. The earth orbits the sun in an ellipse.

The first is verbose 'the domestic orb' is the earth and the solar body is 'the sun'. Nothing is added to the meaning of the sentences by using more complex terms.

The second sentence uses the phrasal verb 'go round' which is normally too vague for academic writing. It states how the earth does not orbit the sun but not how it actually does, which is rather pointless.

The third sentence uses the precise term orbit and describes the orbit as an ellipse. Of course it is necessary to know what these terms mean, which is why the study of vocabulary is essential to academic work.

Explaining the facts: from experience to abstraction and classification

Academic studies are not just concerned with stating facts, but with explaining what things are; that is, with abstraction. Compare these sentences:

1. Because of its composition steel is used to make many things.
2. Steel is a strong metal made from a mixture of iron and carbon. It is used to make products such as knives, cars and bridges.
3. Steel is an alloy of iron and carbon; the latter typically ranging from 0.2% to 4.5%. As the percentage of carbon is increased, the tensile strength increases but the ductility decreases (Alexander & Street 1976: 130, 155). Steel is produced in the form of wire, tube, bar and sheet and used to manufacture agricultural and industrial products, tools and fittings, domestic appliances and vehicles (Tata Steel 2010).

The first sentence says nothing. It does not explain what steel is made of or what type of products it is used for. The use of 'things' is far too vague.

The second sentence is better because it provides a definition of the word steel, although 'strong' is too vague. The definition has been taken from a dictionary without a citation and is thus plagiarism. This would lead to a loss of marks in an assignment. The use of examples is not sufficient: the types of products must be classified.

The third sentence gives a clear explanation of what steel is and then classifies both the forms in which it is produced and the types of products made from it. In order to explain what steel is it was necessary to consult a book on the subject; it was not sufficient to rely on a dictionary definition.