

THIS ACADEMIC TIP SHEET:

- examines the factors that affect the style you use
- discusses paragraphs and their role in effective writing
- looks at how to improve your paragraphs

WRITING STYLE FACTORS

To write effectively, you need to consider and choose structure, content and style.

Structure and content are mostly determined by your specific writing task and by your lecturer.

Style consists of the words you choose, the sentences you combine them in, and the 'person' you write in, i.e. 1st, 2nd, or 3rd person.

The style you adopt depends on the type of text you're asked to write and your purpose in writing, e.g. to persuade, to inform, to entertain.

Often your lecturer will make it clear whether a text should be formal or informal, objective or subjective, rational or emotive, etc. In general, use:

- an academic, formal style for essays and technical writing that avoids slang, generalisations and unsubstantiated opinions OR
- a more descriptive, expressive, evocative language for reflexive/reflective texts.

NOTE: Some writing forms, such as blogs, group evaluations and artists' statements, require a subjective and reflective approach to the subject matter. Here, the use of the first person, e.g. I, my, is often appropriate.

Who's your audience?

The style you adopt is also determined by your audience. Your tutor may prefer that you write in the first person, avoiding the use of the passive voice, for instance, and may not mind if you use bullet points, headings and sub-headings in your essays.

Before you get started, ask your tutor to clarify:

- what they mean by a particular form, e.g. how do they define a literature review?
- whether they have stylistic preferences, e.g. is it OK to write in the first person? Is it OK to use sub-headings in an essay?

Email your tutor

Put your queries about assessments in an email so your tutor will have time to consider their response, and you can check the email as you write. If the answer to your question resolves an ambiguity, or allows you to take a non-standard approach, we suggest you attach the email with your essay.

NOTE: Always show that you've attempted to interpret the instructions. Rather than asking "What does X mean?" ask, "Does X mean ... or does it mean ...?"

Don't expect your tutor to put more thought into their replies than you put into your question!

SAY WHAT YOU WANT TO SAY

Be clear

- Know what you want to say.
- Only use words that you are certain of their meaning. Consult your dictionary.
- Use parallel constructions for lists in sentences, or in dot points, e.g. faith, hope and charity, NOT faith, hopeful and charity.
- Ensure pronouns, e.g. he, she, they, clearly refer to their noun.
- Use transitional words to show the relationship between ideas, e.g. firstly, by contrast, furthermore, likewise.
- Place descriptive words or phrases next to the words they describe, e.g. infants enjoy puréed bananas, NOT puréed, infants enjoy bananas.

Be precise

- Choose verbs, i.e. doing/being words, well.
- Use specialist vocabulary carefully and precisely.
- Beware of words that sound similar, but have different meanings, e.g. economic/economical, uninterested/disinterested.
- Avoid tautologies, e.g. red in colour, the month of May, a free gift.

Be concise

- Choose short sentences – and short words – rather than lengthy ones.
- Choose the active rather than the passive voice, e.g. I like beer, NOT beer is liked by me.
- Eliminate superfluous words, e.g. say 'today' rather than 'at this point in time', 'the sugar in X', rather than 'the sugar that is contained in X', 'cryogenics', rather than 'the field of cryogenics'.
- Your style should be controlled by why you write, what you write and who you write to.

WHAT IS A PARAGRAPH?

A paragraph is a group of sentences that express and develop one central idea, or record the words of a single speaker. It's the unit central to almost all of the writing tasks you'll undertake at university and to most of the texts you'll be required to read.

Length

There is a common perception that a paragraph is at least five sentences or half a page in length. However, length and appearance are not factors in determining paragraph composition. In fact it is unity and coherence of ideas that makes a collection of statements a paragraph.

Composition

Before composing a paragraph you must determine what the main idea is. The information conveyed in each paragraph should always have a clear relationship to the overall topic you're writing about.

This can be achieved by writing down sentences that summarise the information you wish to present in each paragraph.

IMPROVING YOUR PARAGRAPHS

1: Formulate the main idea

Express the main idea in the form of a topic sentence. A topic sentence tells the reader what to expect about the information that will follow – the aim is to announce and control the content of the paragraph. Topic sentences are usually at the beginning of a paragraph. This is generally the preferred style in assignment writing.

2: Explain the main idea

Provide your rationale or reasoning about the idea. This is where you'll need to explain the main idea and discuss it by referring to relevant literature. At this stage, you may include definitions, make distinctions, provide details and integrate quotations. These steps can be repeated as needed.

If necessary, supply an example to connect the topic sentence with your discussion. The example should provide support or evidence for the idea and the explanation you provided.

As well as supplying an example, you may need to concisely explain why you chose to use that example as evidence of the main idea.

3: Close the idea and use a transition to the next paragraph

To consolidate the paragraph, provide a review/recap/summary statement. This is an effective way to draw attention to the relevance of the information in the paragraph and link it back to the central idea/topic. At this stage you'll need to direct the reader's attention to the idea that follows. You can do this with a transition.

Using transitions

Transitions can be single words, phrases or sentences. They're used to establish relationships between sentences in a paragraph. They're also used to create a logical progression of ideas between paragraphs.

Transitions or linking words are powerful tools for pulling ideas together. But don't just sprinkle them into your sentences; use them to support your logic.

Examples:

To signal a reinforcement of ideas: also, for example, in other words, moreover, in addition, more importantly.

To signal a change in ideas: but, instead, although, on the other hand, yet, nevertheless, however, in contrast, in spite of.

To signal a conclusion: thus, in conclusion, therefore, finally, accordingly, so (informal).

EFFECTIVE WRITING CHECKLIST

- Have you determined what style of writing to use?
- Is your writing clear, precise and concise?
- Does your writing have coherent paragraphs?

WANT HELP WITH YOUR STUDY?

Please contact our Academic Skills Centre to find out how we can assist you.

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