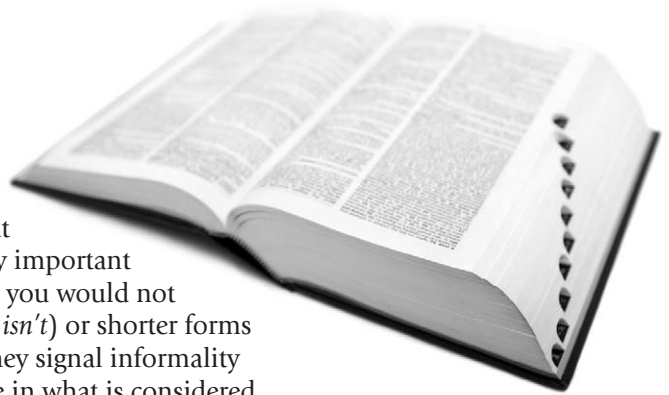


3

Using Appropriate Words in an Academic Essay



As you develop your essay, you need to think carefully about your choice of words. This is very important in academic essays. For example, you would not use contractions (*can't, wouldn't, isn't*) or shorter forms of words (*fridge, auto*) because they signal informality and academic writing takes place in what is considered a formal context. In addition, academic essays are expected to be clear and straightforward so you must also make sure that your words are precise and correct and that your writing is concise.

This chapter provides suggestions on how to choose appropriate words for your academic essays and gives examples of words that students often use wrongly. There are four main considerations:

- Use formal vocabulary
- Use appropriate transitions
- Avoid redundancy
- Beware of commonly misused words

Choosing words that are appropriate in your writing can convince your readers that your work is serious and important. On the other hand, if your words are unclear, ambiguous and/or incorrect, chances are your readers might be confused about the content of your essay or might even think that your work is not worth reading.

3.1 Use Formal Vocabulary

Certain words which we frequently encounter in everyday communication may not be suitable for use in academic essays. These include words which are casual (informal) and commonly used only in spoken English. This does not mean that informal language is inferior to formal language. It simply means that there are words which are more appropriate than others for use in each context.

For example, in reporting work done by others in a subject that you are investigating, you would not write:

A couple of researchers have **found out** that...

Instead, you are more likely to write:

Several researchers have **discovered** that...

To make your essay more formal, make sure that you avoid features of informal language in your writing:

Table 1: Examples of formal and informal language

Features of informal language	Definition	Example	Appropriate alternative
Contractions	Shortened words, with missing letters from the original	The authors don't provide evidence for their claim.	The authors do not provide evidence for their claim.
Slang words	Words characteristic of casual conversation among friends or a particular group of people	One wonders if cosmetic surgeries really originated from the psychological challenges of busted individuals.	One wonders if cosmetic surgeries really originated from the psychological challenges of unattractive individuals.
Abbreviations	Shortened forms of words and phrases, usually consisting of letters taken from their original forms	The survey was conducted ASAP since the respondents needed to leave the country in two weeks' time.	The survey was conducted as soon as possible since the respondents needed to leave the country in two weeks' time.
Clichés	Overused expressions or ideas whose original meaning or effect is lost	The research of Yuan et al. (2007) on sustainable architecture in Singapore is considered to be the cream of the crop .	The research of Yuan et al. (2007) on sustainable architecture in Singapore is considered to be the best .
Colloquialisms	Words, phrases, or expressions characteristic of ordinary or familiar conversation but, unlike slang, usually not limited to use by only one particular group of people.	While current concerns about the loss of jobs in the United States are valid and real, what is more alarming is the growing negative cultural attitude towards India among those who have been Bangalored .	While current concerns about the loss of jobs in the United States are valid and real, what is more alarming is the growing negative cultural attitude towards India among those who have lost their jobs because their companies have relocated to India for cheaper labour costs .

3.1.1 Choose strong verbs

In general, academic writers prefer strong verbs to phrasal verbs (verb + preposition), which are very common in spoken or more casual uses of English, e.g. *establish* instead of *set up*, *produce* instead of *churn out*, *tolerate* instead of *put up with* and *assemble* instead of *put together*. Consider the examples given below:

Phrasal verbs	Strong verbs
The veteran researcher has churned out many articles in recent years.	The veteran researcher has produced many articles in recent years.
The team that was hurriedly put together has not been productive because the members do not share common objectives.	The team that was hurriedly assembled has not been productive because the members do not share common objectives.
In his attempt to establish absolute control, the dictator sought to wipe out all who were opposed to his rule.	In his attempt to establish absolute control, the dictator sought to eliminate all who were opposed to his rule.
The auditors' report suggests that the treasurer had tried to cover up the financial irregularities.	The auditors' report suggests that the treasurer had tried to hide the financial irregularities.
We must be prepared for discomfort in various sectors if we want to bring about change in the system.	We must be prepared for discomfort in various sectors if we want to effect change in the system.

3.1.2 Choose specific verbs

In reporting what you have gathered from reading, you will need to use a variety of verbs that suit your purpose. Rather than using the words *say*, *show* or *report* all the time, you can use more specific verbs in academic reporting as illustrated below:

In the article, "Euthanasia"...the author **outlines** the origins of the practice in the Nazi regime...

Many medical studies have **demonstrated** a clear correlation between smoking and the incidence of lung cancer...

The researcher **maintains** that nanoparticles are likely to remain lodged...

The paper **concludes** that university education must remain accessible to all who qualify and that none should be denied the opportunity...

Available literature seems to **support** the view that one acquires a second language...

The report **notes** that there are inconsistencies in the way the economic data have been presented...

Other useful words for reporting what you have gathered in your secondary research are *assert*, *claim*, *argue*, *infer*, *reason*, *postulate* and *illustrate*.

3.2 Use Appropriate Transitions

Transitions play an important role in the development of an academic essay. They help to create a sense of coherence and provide signposting for the reader to follow the writer's thread of thought. Choosing the appropriate transition that makes the logical connection will ensure that the reader understands the text in the way the author had intended. Consider the following examples:

- A. *The authors have made a strong case for their view and also provided some statistical evidence to support their arguments against euthanasia. **On the other hand**, they have also appealed to the general moral sense of obligation for doctors to save and heal.*
- B. *The authors have made a strong case for their view and also provided some statistical evidence to support their arguments against euthanasia. They have **also** appealed to the general moral sense of obligation for doctors to save and heal.*
- C. *The authors have made a strong case for their view and also provided some statistical evidence to support their arguments against euthanasia. **On the other hand**, they have failed to consider the further distinction between active euthanasia and passive euthanasia.*

The use of *On the other hand* in text A is inappropriate because what follows is not in contrast with the point made in the preceding sentence. The student could have used *Moreover* or *Furthermore* since the intention is to add another point in support of the authors' argument. Alternatively, the text could continue as in B without any transition since the use of *also* in the sentence adequately links it to the previous one. Text C illustrates the correct use of the transition as it signals a contrast.

Here is a text showing another notoriously misused transition:

*In the last few years, revenue from the export sector has been on the decline. **On the contrary**, revenue coming from the hospitality industry has seen a healthy growth.*

In this case, the transition is inappropriate. The student could have used *In contrast* or *On the other hand*. *On the contrary* is used to signal a contrast to an idea expressed just before it or to a claim made or implied, as in the following example:

*In the last few years, revenue from the export sector has been declining sharply. We might therefore expect to see a reasonable dent in the overall growth of the economy. **On the contrary**, the economy is still as robust as before. This could be largely due to...*

3.3 Avoid Redundancy

Conciseness is also a mark of good academic writing. To write an effective essay, you should learn to write precisely and concisely, using only as many words as are necessary to convey what you want to say. Do not add words just to lengthen your essay or create fancy expressions. It is far more important to get your message across effectively.

To weed out redundancy, ask yourself whether what you have written is essential to the meaning you intend to communicate. For example, in an essay on euthanasia, a student wrote about *deliberate suicide*. That raises the question whether suicide is ever not deliberate. Can someone commit accidental suicide? Your answer to the question makes it clear that the word *suicide* should stand on its own without the qualifier *deliberate*.

Redundancy is also commonly seen in the use of *more* or *most* as in the following two examples:

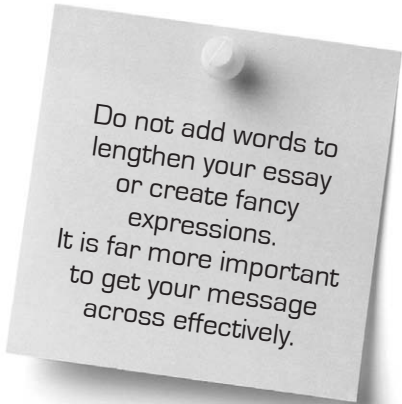
There is a **more preferable** method to do this.
This is the **most unique** case we have yet seen.

If you prefer something, you like it more than something else; therefore, *more* is redundant. In the second case, *unique* means one of its kind, with no equal, so strictly speaking, you cannot have varying degrees of uniqueness.

Another area where redundancy occurs is in the use of prepositions. These are often the ones which appear with verbs but are actually not necessary.

comprise (of)
emphasise (on)
stress (upon)
despite (of)
discuss (about)
request (for)

What about the prefix *ir~* in the word *irregardless*? In fact, *ir~* has the function of creating the opposite of the adjective as in *relevant/irrelevant* and *reconcilable/irreconcilable*. The suffix *~less* has a similar function, as in *faithful/faithless*, *careful/careless* and *painful/painless*. Thus, *irregardless* will have double the effect of the prefix or suffix. *Regardless* is just fine.



Do not add words to lengthen your essay or create fancy expressions. It is far more important to get your message across effectively.

3.4 Beware of Commonly Misused Words

Some words are commonly misused. For example, the word *lesser* is often used as a comparative form for *less* as in:

*This experiment was completed in **lesser time** than expected.*

The correct form should be *less time* since *less* is a comparative form for *little*. *Lesser* is never used as a comparative form of *little* or *less*. It is used to refer to something of lower importance, degree or value, as in the common expression *the lesser of two evils* or *lesser mortals*. It is also used in some biological names to refer to the smaller cousin of related species of plants or animals, such as *the lesser anteater* and *lesser flamingo*.

The following examples illustrate the proper use of pairs of words which are commonly confused:

*I **suspect** we will not be able to complete this paper in time for publication.*

*I **doubt** we can complete this paper in time for publication.*

*It has become harder to gain **access** to the president since the security scare.*

*We need to **assess** the effectiveness of this new measure that the committee has introduced.*

*The Director's **personal** secretary has arranged for a board meeting at short notice.*

*This military exercise involves all **personnel** who are currently in service.*

*He **hung** the pictures on the wall in the board room in anticipation of the chairman's visit.*

*The man convicted of murder was sentenced to be **hanged** next Friday.*

- See Chapter 5: *Proofreading an essay or report* for more advice on locating potential problems in the choice of words in your work.



Conclusion

Remember to check that you use formal vocabulary and that you write concisely — without redundancy and precisely — with words that accurately convey your intended meaning. Also, ensure that your transitions make good logical sense and enhance the coherence of the text.

In addition, you may encounter other situations of uncertainty or confusion. The best guide would be a good dictionary, one that gives you examples of usage. You can also refer to online corpus resources such as the British National Corpus at <http://sara.natcorp.ox.ac.uk/lookup.html> to check how words are used in published works. If help is not available, it is safer to choose to be simple and clear rather than risk confusing your reader.

Further reading

- McAnsh, S., & Pennington, K. (2009). *Vocabulary choice*. Retrieved on 16 June, 2009, from <http://sana.tkk.fi/awe/style/vocabulary/index.html>
- The OWL at Purdue (2009). *OWL materials: Using appropriate language*. Retrieved on June 14, 2009, from <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/608/01/>
- Study and Learning Centre, RMIT University (2009). *Writing in an appropriate style*. Retrieved on June 16, 2009, from http://www.dlsweb.rmit.edu.au/lsu/content/4_WritingSkills/writing_pdf/super_style.pdf

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