

Academic Phrasing

Introduction:

Essay structure and grammar, along with informative critical content, are important to presenting an effective argument. However, one of the most important factors to writing a good essay lies in the way your argument is phrased. In other words, how you say it is as important as what you say, as the saying goes. Incorporating academic phrasing can also be one of the most anxiety inducing aspects of essay writing. Many students think they have to adopt an overly sophisticated vocabulary in order to write in an academic tone. This is not necessarily the case as you can use the vocabulary you already have in a formal and academic manner. Derek Soles states that in effective academic writing the "diction and vocabulary are neither too casual nor too grandiose or pompous" (107).

Active language:

Adopting a more active tone is a good place to start. Using active language instills a degree of authority into your work, whereas the passive voice renders your argument as speculation or conjecture and not analytical. Although there are instances where speculation is required, an active tone presents your critical insight as critical analysis and not speculative opinion. An example of the passive voice is as follows: "It could be argued that the data set is perhaps beneficial as support for the conclusion presented by the analyst." A more active rendition would better serve the writer's stance and engagement with the analyst: "The data set is beneficial in its supporting role for the analyst's final conclusion." The former version raises too many questions - if 'it can be argued' then why is the writer not making that argument? Whereas, the latter can also be used as a means of supporting a critical analysis: "The data set does not effectively support the conclusions put forward by the analyst." When presenting a critical analysis, which most academic essays intend to do, it is more effective to make an argument than allude to its possibility.

The active voice also makes your writing more precise, which ensures your reader will comprehend your logic and rhetoric more fully. For example, a passive statement may read: "Dante's *Inferno* could be read as a parody of the society he lived in but also could perhaps be an insight into contemporary Florentine practices of the Catholic Church." A less wordy version could read: "Dante's *Inferno* both parodies Italian society of the era and provides insight into the

corruption inherent in Florentine practices of the Catholic Church." However, the passive voice can be useful if there is an aspect of your topic that cannot be verified. For example, if evidence is not available to make a conclusive claim but there is significant evidence on which a claim can be put forth: "It would appear that Kafka had insider knowledge of the working of top secret judicial process which is alluded to in *The Trial*." Likewise, if there is a statement that will be argued against, putting it in the passive form will work toward convincing the reader of the validity of your critical analysis.

Formal and informal expression:

It is highly advisable that colloquial and idiomatic language be avoided in academic writing, unless of course the essay is evaluating such a topic, like 'The development of colloquial expression in the inner city', for instance. When providing a literature review, for example, it would not be effective to argue that "Smith was obviously not bothered to consider X and Y and so his analysis isn't very good." This type of phrasing comes across as a biased opinion instead of a knowledgeable insight. Consider the following: "Smith neglects to consider X and Y in his study, rendering his analysis insufficient in its scope." Likewise, the use of informal expression can diminish an otherwise valuable argument. Notice the difference in effect on the tone in the following: "Therefore, it isn't a good idea to go with the advice given by your man", versus, "Therefore, it is not advisable to follow the recommendations offered by the analyst." The latter is more authoritative and convincing. Avoiding the use of contractions and idiomatic expression will only benefit the effectiveness of your writing.

Reduction of the 'I' voice:

Following the avoidance of colloquial and informal expression is the reduction of the 'I' voice. Most secondary level education systems promote the use of the 'I' voice as a way to indicate the author's critical insight in relation to the secondary sources. However, the overuse of the 'I' voice tends to hinder an argument by rendering the statements passive or biased opinion. Avoid phrasing such as "I believe that this passage is the most important for understanding Dickens's *Great Expectation* because it is the most interesting for me." This type of phrasing does not provide any insight as to why the passage is insightful. It only provides an example of what the author finds personally appealing. Presenting the same claim without the 'I' voice can be more engaging: "This passage is important for understanding Dickens's *Great Expectation* as it provides insight into British Empiricism."

Tone: critical insight versus informal opinion:

An effective critical tone avoids using more subjective language such as "Adorno believes the mechanical reproduction of art kills its spirit." Personal systems of belief are not entirely effective as critical analysis. "Adorno argues that the mechanical reproduction kills the creative spirit of art by reducing it to a mere commodity" - this is a far more objective presentation of Adorno's valuable theory of art. Building a reserve of academic words and phrases is important for the academic writer. Terminology that indicates an argument (such as author X 'claims', 'posits', 'argues', 'contends') is exceedingly effective. Likewise, phrasing which highlights classification, conclusion and transition ensures a more academic tone along with improving the 'flow' of the essay by signposting the progression of the argument.

Unbiased language:

Terminology comes in and out of fashion, even in academia. Be aware of the current usage of terminology when discussing social issues such as gender, nationality or medically established disorders or conditions. For instance, it is better to refer to humanity or humankind rather than 'mankind', or 'man.' Avoid using adjectives as collective nouns, use 'women' instead of 'females', 'citizen' over 'natives'. Also, eliminate the use of adjectives that propose an opinionated value judgement. Leave such judgements to your readers. For example: "The *beautifully* designed building is also an example of architecture which is functional as well as *amazingly* environmentally friendly." This would be more objective as, "The building is an example of architectural design which is both functional and environmentally efficient." The use of academic phrasing takes continual refinement and practice; therefore, practise producing academic phrasing that is concise, precise and objective.

Writing Sources:

University of Toronto Writing Advice Website: <http://www.writing.utoronto.ca/advice>

Derek Soles, *The Essentials of Academic Writing*, 2nd Edition (Boston: Wadsworth, 2010).

William Strunk Jr., *The Elements of Style* (Singer: 2010).