



## Academic Writing – Style and Tone

### Tips on style and tone

Academic writing should strike a balanced and reasonable tone: you should not be overly confrontational but this does not mean that you should constantly apologise for your views. You should also be careful not to gush uncritically; compliments should be on the basis of evidence and not made for their own sake. It is not necessary, for example, to keep on praising a composer/performer/author for their brilliance unless it forms a crucial part of your critical analysis.

### *Three things to aim for:*

1. Think carefully about the structure of your prose. Paragraphs should generally contain one main idea and end with a few sentences that create a link to the next.
2. The main points of your essays should be supported by quotations that are discussed, evaluated and built upon.
3. Write according to the instructions. There is no point in elegant essays that fail to address the tasks called for in the assignments. In the Research assignments and listening diaries in particular there are specific tasks you are asked to present in particular ways. Work that does not follow the instructions can only get very poor marks

### *Three things to avoid:*

1. Do not waste words and energy telling the reader what you are doing. If you write clearly and well, the methodology and structure of your essay will be obvious.
2. Never write ‘I have learnt a lot’ or ‘I have enjoyed writing this essay’. Readers are concerned with the information you have gathered and your discussion of the issues raised – whether you have learnt a lot is or enjoyed the process is of little interest.
3. Only very rarely should you preface opinions with “I think” and “In my opinion”. The reader will take it for granted that you mean what you say. Similarly, do not write “It is very interesting that” – readers can make that judgment for themselves!!

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### Offering critical opinions – getting the balance right

In the following three statements, the writer offers an opinion on a book by Churcher. It should be obvious that the tone of the first example is unnecessarily aggressive, but it is easy to fall into the trap of going too far the other way. If you overuse qualifiers such as *rather* and *quite*, it suggests to readers that you are not confident about what you are saying. There is a difference between being cautious and refusing to have the courage of your convictions.

#### *Overconfident assertion:*

This book is largely outdated nonsense.

#### *Balanced caution:*

There have been several thoroughly researched studies on this topic over the last twenty years, and by comparison with these, Churcher's book is beginning to look outdated.

#### *Cowardice:*

It could be argued that Churcher's book is possibly beginning to look rather outdated.

### Overstatement

Even if you adopt a reasonable tone, you should still be careful not to argue a point too strongly as this can sometimes have the opposite effect to that intended. Overstated criticism tends to put a reader on the defensive – it is often more effective to make both sides of a case in order to address your reader's doubts. By the same token, overstated praise can turn the reader against the object of your admiration. Avoid 'great', 'excellent', 'extremely', 'immense', 'tremendous', 'amazing' etc.

#### *Overly gushing:*

Handel had an amazing success in Dublin with his new masterpiece *The Messiah* – his reputation as great composer was truly established.

#### *Overly critical:*

It is absurd that lecturers still use overhead projectors when they have the opportunity to present the same material on PowerPoint. Transparencies are always blurred, dirty, unreadable and often out of date, whilst PowerPoint produces slideshows that both look professional and are easy to modify. It is tempting to wonder if some lecturers simply don't know how to turn a computer on.

#### *Critical but reasonable:*

Few students would be sorry to see the demise of the blurred and out-of-date transparency. PowerPoint has many potential advantages in terms of both presentation and the ability to update slides. Even if overhead projectors tend not to crash or fill the screen with annoying gimmicks, these disadvantages are surely outweighed by the benefits.

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You should also avoid writing sarcastically or condescendingly.

*Informal, sarcastic and inappropriately insulting:*

Well, Bowcker really has chosen his audience carefully here! Neither one thing or the other, this is a right mess and Bowcker might as well just give up writing books if he knows what's good for him!

### **Overuse of question marks**

Whilst your approach to the subject of an academic essay should be enquiring and open-minded, this does not mean that your writing should be full of questions. In particular you should not use question marks to express doubt or to provoke thought.

*Expressing doubt:*

Can we really be sure about that what Bainsi says about Palestrina is true?

*Better rewritten as:*

It is not at all certain that Bainsi is completely reliable in his writing on Palestrina.

You should also not end paragraphs with a flurry of questions, particularly if you do not go on to answer them. It is generally better in any case to rewrite such questions as thought-provoking statements.

Was Cage really a composer? Or was he an inventor?

*Better rewritten as:*

The question as to whether Cage was really a composer or inventor is perhaps answered by the very fact that he would not himself have recognised this distinction.

### **Figures of Speech**

You should not resort to using clichés or figures of speech in order to convey your argument. Clichés are tiresome to read and undermine the authority of your writing. Most annoying of all is when a cliché is enclosed in inverted commas as if it were a quotation.

The last piece in the concert really was 'the icing on the cake'.



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### **Avoid foregrounding yourself and your research/writing process**

The process of writing and research should not intrude upon your writing and nor should you constantly remind the reader that it is you writing the essay.

*Generally avoid sentences that begin in the following ways:*

Palestrina is, to me, a composer who ...

The quotation used here suggests that ...

After researching this topic, I agree ...

We can see here that ...

This seems to be saying ...

It is true to say ...

It is obvious from this that ...

I believe/feel/think/agree that ...

This point is about ...

This passage ...

I believe that ...

### **Avoid choppy writing**

Do not write strings of short sentences. They are tiring to read. Primary school children use them. University students should write more elegantly. They have had plenty of time to improve their literacy.

Do not write strings of short sentences, which are tiring to read. While primary school children do not know any better, university students, who have had plenty of time to improve their literacy, should be able to write more elegant sentences.

### **Using "with" to begin a subordinate clause**

It is very seldom appropriate to use "with" where "because" would do equally well. The use of "with" in this way is a usage largely found only in speech.

*This is poor:*

With Handel's operas not attracting audiences, he had to turn to writing oratorios

*Replace with:*

Because Handel's operas did not attract audiences, he had to turn to writing oratorios

*OR* Handel had to turn to writing oratorios because his operas did not attract audiences

In general, it is better to avoid overusing subordinate clauses at the beginning of sentences. This is because it is tiring for the reader to be constantly waiting for the main clause in each sentence.



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### Overuse of absolute phrases

An absolute phrase is a clause in a sentence that is not connected to any particular word in the main clause, but nevertheless modifies its overall meaning.

*Example (absolute phrase in italics):*

*His first oratorio completed*, Handel was confident enough to write many more.

You should generally not use more than one absolute phrase in a sentence; even with only one per sentence, overuse of this device can make your prose sound breathless or overdramatic.

### Use of the historical present

When writing about ideas found books and articles you should usually write in the present tense. The presumption is that the ideas are still relevant and need not be relegated to the past.

*If the ideas are still current, report them in the present tense:*

Colman argues that plagiarism is such a serious offence that the only appropriate punishment is the forfeit of the entire qualification.

*BUT, if the point of your citation of an idea is the very fact that it is an historical (and outdated) one, you can report it in the past tense:*

In the early nineties Colman argued that the internet would never become a widely used research tool amongst serious students.

### Avoid unnecessary padding

Do not waffle in order to fill up space. It is particularly unnecessary assignments such as reports and reviews where word limits are quite restrictive. The beginnings of sentences are especially common repositories for unnecessary junk - get straight to the point!

*Beginning laden with waffle:*

We can see from this passage that Cage believes that what is very important is the function and nature of silence.

*Concise and to the point:*

The function and nature of silence is important to Cage.

In the first example, the reader is exhausted before any point has been made. The second sentence leaves space and energy for intelligent comment and development.



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“There are” and “it is” are commonly used to stretch out sentences. Be as direct and concise as possible:

*Waffle:*

In this piece, there are many important fundamental issues that are addressed by Cage.

*Direct:*

Cage addresses many fundamental issues in this piece.

### **Always check the exact meaning(s) of words**

Do not use words without checking their meaning (you can check on-line at [www.dictionary.com](http://www.dictionary.com)). It is easy to confuse (or amuse) your reader with wrongly used words, sometimes with the result that you end up saying the opposite of what you mean.

Churcher explains things in very simplistic way - ideal for university students.

This is not a compliment. Simplistic writing treats complex issues as if they were simpler than they really are. Good explanations may be clear and simple but never simplistic.

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### **Common mistakes**

#### Inappropriate capitals

Capitals should be reserved for proper nouns and the beginning of sentences. There is no need to capitalize opera, classical, baroque etc. when discussing them in general.

#### Unnecessary bold and italics

Formatting words or phrases with bold or italics does not generally help your reader. The most common use of these text formats are for quotations, which never need them.

#### Misuse of apostrophes

Do not use where the final "s" denotes a plural

Do not write "it's" unless you mean "it is" (you should, in any case, avoid contractions)

#### Common spelling mistakes

Canon (imitation) / cannon (gun)

Compliment/complement – you compliment (i.e. praise) your host if she chooses a good wine to complement (i.e. complete or perfect) the food

Definite (NOT definate)

Discreet/discrete – you must be discreet (i.e. self-restrained, prudent) but it is better to keep your work and home life discrete (i.e. separate)

Dependent (adjective) / dependant (noun)

Exceed

Imitate

Loose/Lose - you lose your hat but you loose an arrow!

Parallel

Principle/Principal – your principal mistake is failing to understand the basic principle!

Privilege

Receive (NOT recieve)

Repetitive (NOT repetative)

Separate (NOT seperate)

Skilful(ly)

Succeed

Tendency (NOT tendancy)

Where/were – I wish that I were able to find where I left my hat