# Academic Writing Style – TOPIC

#  [Video Transcript]

Re-recorded and edited by Anna Shirley

This is a short video to help you improve your academic writing style by using the acronym ‘TOPIC’. This acronym can help to highlight some of the key differences between informal writing and a formal academic style. ‘TOPIC’ stands for:

**T** for **The full word,**

**O** for **Objective,
P** for **Precise,
I** for **Impersonal,**

**C** for **Cautious.**

Let’s have a look at what we mean by these and how you can improve your writing style.

**The full word, not contractions.**

Contractions are words where some letters are left out when two words are brought together, like ‘don’t’, which combines ‘do’ and ‘not’ into one word. These are often considered informal and should be avoided in academic style.

Common contractions to avoid:

* Don’t = do not
* Won’t = will not
* Isn’t = is not
* He’ll = he will
* It’s=it is

**Objective, not subjective.**

Academic writing should aim to be objective, or neutral, as opposed to subjective, which means writing from a particular point of view. Typical subjective phrases would be: ‘I feel’, ‘I think’, ‘I believe’. Subjective writing can also include emotional words, intended to make your reader feel something. The reason for avoiding subjective language is so that your arguments and evidence can be debated.

Subjective: I like this character.

This sentence can’t be debated because it is a matter of opinion; you can say that you disliked the character and why, but you can’t necessarily change my views. Academic style usually tries to make an argument which can be debated, and uses facts and evidence, rather than emotion, to support it.

Objective: This character is central to the plot.

This statement can be disputed; you can point out issues with plot and the character, and support your view with examples and evidence.

In particular types of assignment, you may be asked for your personal reactions and responses to a reading or an experience, in this case, ignore this guideline, and be as emotional as you like! But refer to your assignment brief first.

**Precise, not vague.**

Academic writing is usually very precise about numbers, places and cases. This is because it makes the conclusions more reliable. Generalisations without detail are not very convincing to the reader. For example, which of these statements would you tend to believe?

Vague: There are loads of issues with the product.

Precise: The product has caused allergic reactions in nearly 10% of consumers and has low satisfaction rates.

Note that the precise version identifies what the issues are and gives specific information about them.

Avoid phrases like ‘loads’, ‘lots’ and so on.

**Impersonal, not personal.**

Personal language uses the first person ‘I’ or ‘we’ and the second person ‘you’. The problem with writing this way in an academic context is that using ‘we’ or ‘you’ makes assumptions about what your reader thinks which may not be accurate.

You can avoid using ‘I’ by using the passive voice. Normally we would say, for instance, ‘I kicked the ball’. In the passive, we would say ‘the ball was kicked’. So ‘I’ is taken out of the sentence and the order of the sentence is reversed.

Writing impersonally can feel inauthentic, as though you are not able to put your own thoughts and ideas into what you are writing. But good academic style puts facts and information first and foremost and personal responses into the background.

**Cautious, not strong.**

Strong language means making claims which are difficult to support, for example: Strong: Chocolate definitely causes cancer.

In an academic context, if you wrote the sentence above, you would have to show that chocolate leads directly to cancer and that there are no other causes. That is very difficult to do.

Cautious: Chocolate has been tentatively linked to cancer.

You still have to support your claim as much as possible, but the cautious language allows you to avoid exaggeration and acknowledge that there may be gaps in your research.

But watch out: don’t over-use cautious language, or you will sound like you have no faith in your conclusions.

Too cautious: ‘Chocolate has tentatively been somewhat linked, in a few cases, to a potential increase in rates of cancer’.

Avoid:

* always, everything, everyone;
* totally, absolutely, definitely, obviously;
* huge, colossal, extreme.

Useful phrases:

* may, might, could;
* indicate, suggest;
* typically, generally, widely;
* major, significant, important;
* probably, likely, potentially.

To recap, academic style should use TOPIC:

* The full word, not contractions;
* Objective terms;
* Precise phrasing;
* Impersonal language and;
* Cautious phrasing.

Need any more help?

Come to a Drop-In on campus or online, every Weekday 12-1pm, Book a Tutorial with someone on the learning development team, or email us at the addresses shown here:

email us: LDMentors@mynorthamptonac.onmicrosoft.com

Learningdevelopment@northampton.ac.uk

Thank you.