Lecture 4: Formal Language in Academic Writing

Although the dissertation is assessed on the content and the quality of the findings, the language used in writing is as important as the content and the findings. It is the vehicle that transports the content. Thus, the language used in academic writing must fit the subject, genre, purpose, and audience. Any inconvenience in the choice of language may confuse the readers and destruct their attention. Moreover, they may not take your ideas seriously if they are informally expressed. Therefore, decisions on the level of formality, technicality and familiarity should be appropriately taken. Tent (2008: 31) claims that "Inaccurate, clumsy or excessively complex English may make it harder for your reader to understand the content of your dissertation, adversely affecting how your work will be assessed".

1. **Formal style**

The common assumption about formality is the style or the language that tends to be complex, technical and highly selective with long phrases and compound structures. In fact, formal language tends to be clear, accurate and consistent. It commonly follows the conventions expected in standard written English and avoids everyday expressions, slang, and colloquial language. Meanwhile, it is based on sentences that are grammatically accurate and semantically clear with full perfection in spelling and lexis selection. Generally speaking, formal language/style avoids these features.

- Overuse of personal language (I, my, we etc) i.e. be objective rather than subjective.
- Imprecise words (nice, big, things, like, persons, etc), instead use (pleasant, large, reasons, problems, such as, for example, teachers, students, etc)
- Being too dogmatic and making sweeping generalizations. It is usually best to use some sort of "hedging" language.

- The use of sexist language, such as chairman, businessman, mankind. Don't refer to "the doctor" as he and to the teacher as 'she'; instead, make the subject plural and refer to them as *they*. Avoid he/she, herself/himself etc..
- The use of contractions (don't, can't, I'll, I' m, etc.), instead use full forms (do not, cannot, I will, I am, etc)
- The use of colloquial language or slang (e.g. kid, a lot of/lots of, cool)
- The use of emotive language (emotionally charged words)
- Common but vague words and phrases such as get, nice, thing. Your writing needs to be more precise.
- Overuse of brackets; overuse of exclamation marks or dashes

Instead, formal language uses:

- Clear and precise vocabulary; hence, clichés, colloquialisms, idioms, some phrasal verbs, and slang are avoided. Likewise, a lot of synonyms are used in order to avoid the repetition of the same words. Also, much vocabulary derived from French and Latin is used.
- Capital letters appropriately and never use the type of language used in texting
- Impersonal subjects instead (It is believed that ..., it can be argued that ...)
- Passive verbs to avoid stating the 'doer' (Tests have been conducted)
- Verbs (often with it as subject) such as imagine, suggest, claim, suppose
- 'Attitudinal signals' such as apparently, arguably, ideally, strangely, unexpectedly. These words allow you to hint at your attitude to something without using personal language.
- Verbs such as would, could, may, might which 'soften' what you're saying and express hedging.
- Qualifying adverbs such as some, several, a minority of, a few, many to avoid making overgeneralizations.

2. Formal Vs informal language

There are a number of features that distinguish formal language from informal language which are mainly related to vocabulary, grammar and register. Formal language is less personal than informal language. It suits professional or academic purposes like university assignments. Informal language is more casual and spontaneous. It is the language of everyday communication between friends such as personal emails, text messages and in some business correspondence.

2.1. Vocabulary

a. Academic formal style chooses single verbs than phrasal or prepositional verbs.

Example

- *According to some linguists, **coming up with** clear proof of the increasing number of code switchers has been difficult.*
- *According to some linguists**, offering** clear proof of the increasing number of code switchers has been difficult.*

b. Words derived from French or Latin are considered more formal than the words derived from the language of the Anglo-Saxons.

Example

VERBS		NOUNS	
to depart	to go	carnivore	meat-eater
to retain	to keep	putrefaction	rot
to cease	to stop	deficiency	lack
to function	to work	vision	sight
to masticate	to chew	residence	home
to demonstrate	to show	respiration	breathing
to reside	to live	somnambulist	sleep-walker
to appear	to seem	comprehension	understanding
to abbreviate	to shorten	perspiration	sweat
to terminate	to end		
to assist/aid	to help	ADJECTIVES	
commence/initiate	to begin	incorrect	wrong
to desire/require	to want	amiable	friendly
to obtain	to get	vacant	empty
to liberate/release	to free	insane	mad
to consume	to eat	inexpensive	cheap
		vivacious/animated	lively
ADVERBIALS		superior/improved	better
subsequently	next/later	infantile/ juvenile	childish
principally	mostly/mainly	immature/puerile	
consequently/therefore	so	sufficient	enough
initially	at first	entire/complete	whole
ultimately/finally	in the end	senior	older

2.2. Grammar

a. Avoid contractions

Example:

- *Anxious students **won't** improve their classroom interaction until they receive some instructional assistance*
- *Anxious students **will not** improve their classroom interaction until they receive some instructional assistance*

b. . Use the more appropriate negative form:

Not … any = no

Example:

- *The analysis **didn't** yield **any** new results.*
- *The analysis yielded **no** new results.*

Not … much = little

Example:

- *The Department of English **didn't** allocate **much** time for written expression course.*
- *The Department of English allocated **little** time for the written expression course.*

Not … many = few

Example:

- *This problem **doesn't** have **many** viable solutions.*
- *This problem has **few** viable solutions.*

c. Limit the use of 'run-on' expression: *and so forth, etc.*

Example:

- *Web-based learning uses email, web pages, video conferencing, **etc.***
- *Web-based learning uses email, web pages, video conferencing **and other web applications.***

d. Avoid addressing the reader as you (except if you are writing a textbook or instructions).

Example:

- *You can see the results in Table 1.*
- *The results can be seen in Table 1.*

e. Avoid direct questions.

Example:

- *What can be done to lower anxiety?*
- *We now need to consider how anxiety can be lowered.*

f. Place adverbs within the verb.

Example:

- ***Actually,*** *very little is known about the general nature and prevalence of plagiarism.*
- *Very little is **actually** known about the general nature and prevalence of Plagiarism.*

Example:

- *This model was developed by Krugman (1979) **originally**.*
- *This model was **originally** developed by Krugman (1979).*

g. Use split infinitive where necessary.

Example:

- *We need to meet the needs of those enrolled in the program **adequately**.*
- *We need to **adequately** meet the needs of those enrolled in the program.*
- *Neural networks have the ability to classify new patterns **correctly.***
- *Neural networks have the ability to **correctly** classify new patterns.*

h. Aim for an efficient use of words.

Example:

- *It may be difficult to make a decision about the method that we should use.*
- *Choosing the proper method may be difficult.*

References

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- Tent, J. (2008). *Writing your dissertation: a guide*. Australia: Macquarie University.
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Classroom practice

1. **Multi-word verbs (phrasal verbs): Consider this passage and then re-write it to make it more formal.**

Coal is expected to continue to account for almost 27% of the world's energy needs. However, awareness of pressures on the environment is **building up** and people have **caught on** to the need to achieve sustainable development in energy resources. The way in which the resource is extracted, transported and used is now seen as critical.

A wide range of pollution control devices and practices have been **set up** at most modern mines and significant resources are spent on **coming up with** new ways to rehabilitate mined land. In addition, programmes are currently being **dreamed up** which will be able to lead to efficiencies and reduce emissions of greenhouse gases during coal consumption. Such measures are helping coal to **keep up** its status as a major supplier of the world's energy needs. […] Nevertheless, despite its historic value, greenhouse warming and rising temperatures are issues that the world's population needs to urgently **deal with**.

2. Consider these sentences and underline those elements that reflect an informal style and change them to a more formal style.

1. As soon as you start to look carefully at social service provision in the community, you frequently find evidence of abuse. **(generalised use of *you*)**

2. The advisory panel set up by the government couldn't establish the cause of the disaster and in the end no blame was attached to the actions of the pilot. **(Use of contractions like *couldn't, can't, isn't*)**

3. The invasion of the island resulted in misery, starvation, destitution etc for large numbers of the people in the area and in addition the ruling party was unwilling to ask for aid. **(Use of *etc/and so on/ and so forth*)**

4. This proposal creates a way for raising awareness in the UK of effective approaches to combat poverty practised by overseas partners**. (Meaning totally *unclear*)**

5. The evidence produced at the enquiry was very damaging for the Prime Minister and anyone could see that he felt uncomfortable. **(Avoid use of expressions like *anyone could see*)**

6. 1 believe that without clear leadership from the United Nations, we are likely to find ourselves in a similar position next year. **(Use of *I / we / ourselves*)**

7. It is obvious that the decline of fish stocks in the North Sea will ultimately result in significant environmental damage in that area. (**Avoid use of expressions like *it is obvious***)

8. They found evidence of a fight when they studied the ancient body and they wrote a report which reflected their findings. (**The passive voice would be more appropriate**)

9. The results of the government study were great because they enabled the university to fund the new department. (**Inappropriately informal language like *great***)

10. It is certain that the new financial regulations will lead to a significant growth in output. (***It is certain* is too strong**)

11. The research was rigorous. But the way the results were used was poor. Few financial managers were trained in the new techniques. Little progress was made despite the hard work of the specialists. (**Short sentences and no linking expressions**)

3. **Rewrite this passage in a suitably academic style.**

The island was discovered in 1734 when a storm blew Sir Peter Newsbury off course and he stumbled upon this bit of land which no-one knew anything about before. Some excavations which have been carried out within the last ten years show us that members of the crew built houses to live in, and got through the very cold winter. Analysis of the soil in and around these buildings proves that the people liked to eat fish and fruit that they picked from the trees. However, despite the food that they had, it's obvious that their life was quite difficult because of the rocks and open ground and so on. People carrying out research have found debris from the ship close to the buildings. They have come up with a number of explanations for the smashing up of the ship but once you look at the waves you can see how dangerous the waters are in this area and there are lots of rocks and reefs and things like that.

4. **Multi-word verbs are very common in spoken English as they are less formal than single verbs. In contrast, single verbs can sometimes sound quite pompous in everyday speech. Compare:**

I *asked for* another appointment.

I *requested* another appointment.

Now it is your turn.

Informal

He *checked up on* his accountant.

They *put up with* their neighbours.

She *caught on* very quickly.

She *made up for* it with an early night.

He *went down with* a fever.

The cost of living *went up*.

5. **Use the verbs below to complete the sentences. Remember to change the verb into the correct tense.**

Postpone, establish, fluctuate, investigate, reduce, deceive maintain acquire

- The research team tried to find out the truth.
- The project managed to get hold of a new scanner.
- His discovery enabled school heads to cut down on the time lost between classes.
- When the team looked looking into the problem, they found that it was much more complex than they had first thought.
- The levels go up and down as a result of the pressure changes.
- The government put off a decision until they had heard the report.
- The inspector was taken in by the apparent calm in the building.
- The solicitor made out that his client was unfairly accused.

6. **The sentences below are grammatically accurate but the style is informal. Re-write these sentences in a more formal style making any changes you need to.**

- The planners reviewed the report and said that it was great.
- It's obvious that the work environment is going to get a lot worse.
- The Chinese economy would like to look after itself, but it's also affected by things that happen outside the country.
- Their historical approach to economics is just not the right way to go about it.
- Personally, I think that economic stability depends upon social cohesion.
- The research team said that their techniques were ok but needed to be further refined.
- It was clear that the team had done a lot and were satisfied with what they'd done.
- They worked together on the project for 10 years.

Keys to tasks

Keys to task 1

Coal is expected to continue to account for almost 27% of the world's energy needs. However, awareness of pressures on the environment is **growing** and people **are now aware** of the need to achieve sustainable development in energy resources. The way in which the resource is extracted, transported and used is now seen as critical.

A wide range of pollution control devices and practices have been **installed** at most modern mines and significant resources are spent on **establishing** new ways to rehabilitate mined land. In addition, programmes are currently being **devised** which will be able to lead to efficiencies and reduce emissions of greenhouse gases during coal consumption. Such measures are helping coal to **maintain** its status as a major supplier of the world's energy needs.

[…] Nevertheless, despite its historic value, greenhouse warming and rising temperatures are issues that the world's population need to urgently **address**

Keys to task 3

The discovery of the island was made in 1734 when Sir Peter Newsbury was blown off course and chanced upon the undiscovered island. Excavations carried out within the last ten years indicate that crew members built houses to live in, and succeeded in living through the very cold winter. Analysis of the soil in and around these buildings suggests that the crew survived by eating fish as well as fruit that they picked from the trees. However, despite the availability of food, the evidence indicates that their life was difficult because of the rocky and exposed landscape. Researchers have discovered debris from the ship close to the buildings. They have proposed a number of explanations for the wreck of the ship but coastal tide patterns indicate that the sea is dangerous in this area and there are many submerged reefs.

Keys to task 4

He *investigated* his accountant.
They *tolerated* their neighbours.
She *understood* very quickly.

She *compensatedfor* it with an early night.

He *contracted* a fever.

The cost of living *increased*.

Keys to task 5

- The research team tried to *establish* the truth.
- The project managed to *acquire* a new scanner.
- His discovery enabled school heads to *reduce* the time lost between classes.
- When the team looked *investigated* the problem, they found that it was much more complex than they had first thought.
- The levels *fluctuate* as a result of the pressure changes.
- The government *postponed* a decision until they had heard the report.
- The inspector was *deceived* by the apparent calm in the building.

  The solicitor *maintained* that his client was unfairly accused

Keys to task 6

- The planners reviewed the report and said that it was *very satisfactory*.
- *There is evidence to suggest* that the work environment is going to *deteriorate*.
- The Chinese economy would like to be *self-sufficient*, but it's also affected by *external factors*.
- Their historical approach to economics is *inappropriate*.
- *Some writers maintain* that economic stability depends upon social cohesion.
- The research team said that their techniques were *satisfactory* but needed to be further refined.
- It was clear that the team had *completed a significant amount of work* and were satisfied with *their achievements*.
- They *collaborated* on the project for 10 years.