Introduction:

Developing your writing capabilities is an important part of your study at university. You need to understand the different types of academic writing you’re required to use and how to plan and structure your work and appropriately acknowledge your references.

Academic writing

Academic writing is generally quite formal, objective (impersonal) and technical. It is formal by avoiding casual or conversational language, such as contractions or informal vocabulary. It is impersonal and objective by avoiding direct reference to people or feelings, and instead emphasising objects, facts and ideas. It is technical by using vocabulary specific to the discipline.

Different disciplines also have different styles and structures of writing. For example, some disciplines, such as in the humanities, expect longer paragraphs, which include topic sentences to show how your argument is structured. Other disciplines, for example in the sciences, expect short paragraphs, with no topic sentences, which are denser in factual information.

To be a good academic writer, you will need to learn the specific styles and structures for your discipline, as well as for each individual writing task. Some ways to do this are to:

* ask for more information from your lecturer/supervisor/tutor
* study the writing style of the academic articles in the most prestigious journals in your discipline
* look at the successful writing by other students in your subject area.

Formal language

You can make your writing more formal through the vocabulary that you use. For academic writing:

* choose formal instead of informal vocabulary. For example, ‘somewhat’ is more formal than ‘a bit’, ‘insufficient’ is more formal than ‘not enough’.
* avoid contractions. For example, use ‘did not’ rather than ‘didn’t’.
* avoid emotional language. For example, instead of strong words such as ‘wonderful’ or ‘terrible’, use more moderate words such as ‘helpful’ or ‘problematic’.
* instead of using absolute positives and negatives, such as ‘proof’ or ‘wrong’, use more cautious evaluations, such as ‘strong evidence’ or ‘less convincing’.

Objective language

Although academic writing usually requires you to be objective and impersonal (not mentioning personal feelings), often you may still have to present your opinion. For example, you may need to:

* interpret findings
* evaluate a theory
* develop an argument
* critique the work of others.

To express your point of view and still write in an objective style, you can use the following strategies.

* More information around in the sentence to emphasise things and ideas, instead of people and feelings. For example, instead of writing ‘I believe the model is valid, based on these findings’, write ‘These findings indicate that the model is valid’.
* Avoid evaluative words that are based on non-technical judgements and feelings. For example, use ‘valid’ or ‘did not demonstrate’ instead of ‘amazing’ or ‘disappointment’.
* Avoid intense or emotional evaluative language. For example, instead of writing ‘Parents who smoke are obviously abusing their children’, write ‘Secondhand smoke has some harmful effects on children’s health’.
* Use modality to show caution about your views, or to allow room for others to disagree. For example, instead of writing ‘I think secondhand smoke causes cancer’, write ‘There is evidence to support the possibility that secondhand smoke increases the risk of cancer’.
* Find authoritative sources, such as authors, researchers and theorists in books or articles, who support your point of view, and refer to them in your writing. For example, instead of writing ‘Language is, in my view, clearly something social’, write ‘As Halliday (1973) argues, language is intrinsically social’.

Different disciplines often have quite different expectations about how objective or subjective your writing can be. For example, in some fields it is fine to use first person, such as 'my view is that...', while in other fields this is not acceptable. You should look at the convention used in published articles in your discipline area, and check with your lecturer.

Technical language

As well as using formal language, you also need to write technically. This means that you need to develop a large vocabulary for the concepts specific to the discipline or specialisation you’re writing for. To do this, take note of terminology used by your lecturer and tutor, as well as in your readings.

Be careful about the meaning of technical terms. Often the same word has a different meaning in another discipline. For example, ‘discourse’ is a technical term used in multiple disciplines with different meanings.

Make sure you also understand and use the key categories and relationships in your discipline, that is, the way information and ideas are organised into groups. For example, in the discipline of Law, law is separated into two types: common law and statute law. Knowing these distinctions will help you structure your writing and make it more technical and analytical.