

8 Some Tips and Tricks to Help Your Writing Right Now

Academic writing is a unique creature, as hopefully you've figured out by now. In many ways, it follows our natural thinking processes, as you saw with the story of the two friends arguing over the movie. But in academic writing, we sort of "formalize" this process, and standardize it. That's part of what makes it so difficult.

And that is where a lot of students get hung up: that process of making their writing formal and standardized. Because of its formal nature, this type of writing can hang you up with little errors that you wouldn't think about in other types of writing. We've tried to think of several of these, and we've included them here as a sort of last-minute, "Hail Mary" pass to help you avoid the unnecessary loss of points in your essays. They are in no particular order, but hopefully you will find them helpful.

1. **Almost never use first- and second-person pronouns**

In particular, avoid these:

I
Me
My
We
Us
Our
You
Your

In much of our everyday writing and speaking, we talk about ourselves and the people to whom we are speaking. We do things like this:

"I didn't like the movie, because the acting was lousy."
"You should study more if you want to get good grades."

However, academic writing is more formal and more... let's say, "detached." We are not talking just about ourselves, and we don't call the reader, "you." We use the third person, and our goal is to be objective (remember our discussion of objective vs. subjective in chapter 5?). Talking about yourself is pretty much by nature subjective, so instead, we speak in general terms about others:

"The movie was bad because of the lousy acting."
"A person should study more if he or she wants to get good grades."

NOTE: in some essays, you are allowed to use the first person, but usually that will be spelled out to you. Otherwise, avoid those pronouns listed above!

2. **Cut chatty phrases at the start of sentences.**

Don't start sentences with these words:

Now
So
Well
Sure
Yes
No

We do this a lot when we talk:

“Well, that's the problem, isn't it?”
“Now, the successful person works harder than that.”
“Sure, a lazy person might get lucky.”

But we should avoid these in academic writing. They are useless fillers, and you'll often get knocked on points for using them.

3. **Avoid filler phrases generally**

We talked about this when we spoke of clear and concise writing, but be extra careful here. A filler phrase is one that is useless and just takes up space:

“There are a lot of colleges out there that teach Russian.”

The phrase “out there” is useless. Where else would these colleges be? In here? This is more concise:

“There are a lot of colleges that teach Russian.”

4. **Let's do... (Never command the reader)**

Avoid commanding the reader. “Let's...” is a command I see a lot. Don't do this:

“So let's look more closely at the numbers behind domestic abuse...”

There are several problems here:

First, did you notice the “so” here? Look at item #2 above.

Second, you don't need to suggest that we look at these numbers. This is YOUR ESSAY. Just DO IT. Instead of “So, let's look...” just pull up those numbers. Skip the “let's” sentence entirely and get to the point.

And never command the reader. Don't do this:

"Make your kids get off the Xbox and go outside to play."

Your reader might not even have kids, and I guarantee that he or she doesn't want to be ordered around by you. Do this:

"Parents should make their kids get off the Xbox and go outside to play."

5. **As a follow up to number 4, never say, "I would like to do..."**

Again, this is your essay. You don't have to get the reader's permission to do whatever it is you want. Just DO IT. Cut the sentence entirely and do whatever it is you want to do.

This is usually used as a sort of filler. A sentence saying, "Let's do X..." or "I would like to do X..." takes up more space. But remember, we're shooting to be concise here.

6. **NO "I think," etc.**

Few things weaken an essay more than these phrases:

I think
I believe
I feel
In my opinion

Now, if your essay instructions REQUIRE you to use these phrases (I can't imagine it ever would), then follow the instructions. But generally speaking, cut these phrases. Your thoughts and beliefs and feelings and opinions are NOT evidence, and do not make your argument any stronger. Compare:

I think gay marriage should be legalized.
I believe that all guns should be outlawed.
I feel that sex ed is better than abstinence
In my opinion, we should have unisex bathrooms in schools

vs. these:

Gay marriage should be legalized.
All guns should be outlawed.
Sex ed is better than abstinence
There should have unisex bathrooms in schools

See how much stronger these are WITHOUT those phrases?

7. **Don't talk about your paper or yourself.**

Don't do this:

"In this essay, I am going to..."

Remember our analogy about the window, and how we want the reader to look through the window instead of AT the window? This phrase forces the reader to look at the window (your essay). NEVER do that. Instead of saying what you are going to do, just DO IT.

And don't do this:

"I did some research, and found that..."

Don't talk about yourself or the process you went through in writing your paper. Just get to the point:

"Author X, in her article on this topic, argues that..."

Just share that research. Your reader assumes that you found it (or you wouldn't have included it in your paper).

Hopefully these tips will help you from losing unnecessary points!