

Five Habits to Avoid in Academic Writing

1. Passive voice

An active sentence contains a subject that acts on a direct object:

I bought the magazine.

A passive sentence occurs when the object becomes the subject of the sentence and is the recipient, rather than the source, of the action:

The magazine was bought by me.

The passive voice tends to spring up in academic writing when the "doer" of an action is indefinite or unknown, when a researcher feels uncomfortable using subjective [pronouns](#) like *I* or *we*, or when the result of the action is more important than who acted. In these cases, the passive voice can be appropriate in academic writing, especially when rephrasing the sentence would introduce absurdity or unnecessarily complicated phrasing.

However, sometimes the passive voice can frustrate a reader and, in extreme cases, represent an abdication of responsibility, as in the following example:

Mistakes were made.

Who made the mistakes? Sentences like these make readers wonder whether the author is trying to pull a fast one on them.

Generally, though, the passive voice is simply cumbersome. We recommend looking over your academic writing and scrutinizing every instance of *is*, *are*, *was*, and *were*. Is there a way to make the sentence stronger by identifying the subject and making it the actor in the sentence?

2. Needlessly complex sentence structure

Much academic writing contains sophisticated and complex thinking, as it should. However, the writing used to express this thinking does not have to be convoluted or unclear.

Meandering clauses, dangling modifiers, and the like are so common in academic writing that one scholarly journal began holding a contest to choose the worst sentence of the year.¹ Whether you can make heads or tails of these sentences is beside the point. The goal of writing is to communicate your ideas. Furthermore, academic writing that seems almost deliberately unclear makes our academic editors, as well as scholarly readers, wonder whether the author even understands what he or she means to say.

It is possible to simplify and streamline your writing without "dumbing it down" or sacrificing nuance and complexity. We recommend reading your sentences aloud and then looking for ways to eliminate the [wordiness](#) of your sentences by breaking them up. Put yourself in your reader's shoes and think about whether your meaning comes across clearly.

3. Trumped-up vocabulary

Academic writing is also famous for using an abundance of complicated vocabulary that does little to convey the meaning clearly. While much academic writing is targeted to an "insider" audience (readers who will know and understand the technical vocabulary of a given field), some writers go overboard, choosing the multisyllabic and rarely used synonym instead of a plain but effective word. Try to keep jargon and obscure language to a minimum. Always remember that your goal is to *communicate* your ideas, not hide them in obscure terminology.

4. Overuse of footnotes

Footnotes are a useful way to include information that has value but falls outside the scope of a paper's main focus. Sometimes, though, academic writing overuses footnotes, and the reader suffers. We recommend asking yourself: are all your footnotes justified? If the information is important enough to warrant its own footnote, it may just be important enough to be included in the body of the paper.

5. Plagiarism

This one's more than a bad habit in academic writing—it could get you expelled or fired. Some [plagiarism](#) is intentional, but more often than not, disorganized research and careless writing are to blame. Avoiding plagiarism is simple: Any time you use someone else's words, give credit to the source. Slow down and pay attention. Take good notes. Stay cautious and over-cite. Make sure the information in your bibliography is accurate and complete. Authors work hard on their research and writing—give credit where credit is due.

Tightening up your academic writing will help enhance your research paper and greatly increase your chances of getting published in a scholarly journal. Submit your next piece to one of our [editing services for academics](#) and receive an expert analysis ASAP!