

2.8 Good style

What is good style?

The overriding characteristic of a good writing style is that it is easy for the reader to understand. What is easy for one reader to understand, however, may not be easy for another. The writer therefore needs to know who the audience is and be aware of their background and expectations. The vocabulary and language structures that are easy for your marker or a manager to understand will be those with which they are familiar – those of your text books, the literature, and the commercial workplace. As you become more familiar with this vocabulary and ways of structuring texts, you will find it easier to use these terms and forms. While you are learning, it is helpful to refer to the literature in the area for examples and models.

Apart from the particular structures and vocabulary of your particular field, there are several characteristics of good style that are common to all formal writing, in whatever field.

See 2.6

- The writing is clear
- The **argument** is easy to follow
- The language is impersonal
- There are few errors

Several techniques to achieve each of these are described below.

Clear expression

Contrary to what many undergraduates believe, good writing is not complicated. The writer's aim should be to express, rather than impress, and that means short sentences rather than convoluted ones, and short words rather than long words used simply to impress. The best writers are those who get their message across without clutter or pomposity.

Another aspect of clear, direct writing is the writer's use of their own words so that the writing flows effortlessly and feels authentic. Only use a quotation instead of your own words if the quote states an idea in a way that captures the meaning in a special, desirable way. Always acknowledge a quote or use of another's idea with quotation marks and by **citing** the source.

See 2.11

The third element of writing after sentence and word choice that makes for clear expression, is punctuation. The purpose of punctuation is to make the meaning clear: a full stop ends a complete idea; a comma divides up a list or separates out a part of a sentence; a colon (:) signals that elaboration will follow; a semicolon (;) divides two ideas that the writer wants connected. Too much punctuation halts the flow of the ideas and the meaning for the reader.

Finally, paragraphs and headings assist the reader by dividing up chunks of meaning, signalling that the writer is moving on to something different. Too many headings or small paragraphs interfere with the reader's efforts to tie ideas together; too few can cause an overload. A long paragraph needs to hang together well to be readily understood. Markers (words that signal relationships, such as 'first' and 'nevertheless'), careful use of pronouns, and having adjacent sentences linked all assist such cohesion.

Clarity of argument

See 2.6

The centrality of argument in **academic writing** and its characteristics are spelt out in another section. The clarity of the argument rests primarily on clear thinking, which can be assisted by representing the argument diagrammatically. Representing the main proposition in the centre or top of a diagram, then labelling subsidiary boxes with titles for each supporting argument, can help to conceptualise how your ideas fit together and how they might be organised as paragraphs. Then under each box title, list the points to be made for that idea. Counter arguments can be noted in smaller subsidiary boxes. This diagram can be a valuable reference point in organising the whole assignment and in keeping on track during the writing.

At all times the writer must consider the reader. Punchy, direct first and last paragraphs help the reader by, first, setting up a clear expectation as to what is to follow, and at the end, consolidating all that has gone before. Language markers that signal how the different ideas and illustrations hang together are also valuable guides to the argument for the reader.

Impersonal language

Impersonal, formal language is used to imply impartiality in the analysis and presentation of an argument or of events. It is the language of media reports. Impersonal language is the language of all formal writing and involves avoiding 'I', 'we', 'this author' and 'this writer'. Instead, wording such as the following can be used.

An analysis of the existing costing system of the company shows that ...

The following discussion presents ...

This paper explores the relationship between ...

Without errors

The first impressions that a report or an assignment conveys to a management group, a client or a tertiary marker will colour their approach to the argument and the ideas contained in it. Errors encountered in the first few pages give the impression of carelessness and an inability to attend to detail. While it is very difficult to produce a piece of writing that is completely error free, students should put in place practices that reduce the errors in their work. Habits developed as students not only earn marks at university, but continue to impress in the workplace.

The most important habit that a student can foster is to proofread final drafts at least twice: the first time to ensure that the argument flows smoothly from sentence to sentence and between paragraphs, and the second, to check on spelling. Most writers find they need to proofread a hard copy rather than on screen, as thorough proofreading requires word by word reading to ensure that the correct word ('there' instead of 'their', 'product' instead of 'produce') has been used.

Spell checkers do not identify these as errors. Reading for fluency of argument can lead to reordering, deleting and rewriting of sections, the insertion of markers and word changes. While this can be easy to sort out with pencil and paper, the word processor has cut the time needed for such extensive editing enormously.

Proofreading should always be done with a dictionary and a thesaurus on the desk. If any sentence sounds ungrammatical, try rewriting the sentence in another way or as two sentences. It is helpful to make times with a friend to check out sentences that concern you both. If you often have trouble with English grammar, keep a list of your sentences that are incorrect and on the adjoining page, the same ideas expressed correctly so you can refer to them later as models. You may need help from the **LTDU** to identify errors and to correct them.

See 2.1