

How to Sound Academic

Students often say they want to sound ‘more academic’. Like grammar, ‘sounding academic’ is less important than good research and good argument, but it does affect your mark. There are several ways to achieve the right tone.

Organisational culture’s observable through many different aspects. Brocke and Sinni (2009) showed us that an individual can learn a lot about the business and how it operates from talking to current employees.

Two of the problems here are well-known.

- Academic writing never contracts words (i.e. never runs them together with an apostrophe), so “culture’s” should be the full “culture is”.
- Academic writing avoids first person (“I”, “me”, “we”, “myself”, etc.) unless there’s a good reason, and avoids second person (“you”) entirely – there’s no good reason for “us”, so it should be removed.

Rules like that can feel unnecessary, and it’s more important to understand *why* they’re unacademic. Not contracting words (the way you do in a conversation) is just part of being careful, and not talking about yourself or the reader is part of concentrating on the evidence and argument, not on the personalities of the people involved. Both are part of academic culture, and so of academic writing.

Two, less obvious, other issues also appear here.

- In English, an idea can often be expressed in many different words; for example, a “person”, “individual”, “guy”, “bloke”, “inquirer”, “chap” or simply “someone” can all learn about a business. These words often differ in their formality. A word like “guy” is too informal, suggesting a conversation instead of reasoned argument – but in the same way, “individual” is too formal, referring to a person as a sociological unit when just “a person” would be easier and more direct. This is a constant challenge: be formal, but not too formal; if you just want to say something, say it simply and directly.
- These alternative words also often have slight differences of meaning. Learning new vocabulary, and testing new words, is therefore good – the more words you control, the more exactly you can communicate. But testing new words also means making mistakes, and many students misuse words they’re unsure about, such as this student writing “alot” when they mean “a lot”. Be careful with synonyms, and remember that words in a thesaurus aren’t exactly the same.

That is, register isn’t just about conforming to a code – it’s also about using vocabulary/grammar to concentrate on evidence and logical order, in as clear and precise a way as possible.

For instance, many people would say that this passage sounds fairly academic

To suggest there is an ideal structure for all organisations is a bold and debatable statement that a lot of people would oppose. When you look at the fact that the objective for most organisations is to be efficient, effective and profitable, the statement of an ideal structure doesn't seem so bizarre.

but there are also a couple of problems here. The unnecessary “you” and the contraction “doesn't” have already been discussed, but more importantly

- “a debatable statement that a lot of people would oppose” is redundant (says the same thing twice – anything “debatable” is opposed by some people). Students sometimes write redundantly to emphasise an idea, which is unnecessary, but some students write redundantly to make their work sound grand and impressive. That's definitely unacademic. Register is about making an argument, not a speech, and building up an emotional reaction with repetition is the wrong approach.
- “doesn't seem so bizarre” is also a popular trick in political speeches, using a negative when there's no need. The writer means “is plausible”, and should just say that. Making an idea complicated or indirect increases the danger of misunderstanding, and should never be done for effect.
- “a lot of people” is vague – does “a lot” mean five, or ten thousand, or a billion? Your reader should get your meaning as clearly as possible, with as little need to interpret it for themselves as possible.
- hedging (not sounding overconfident) is an important part of academic writing; your argument should always recognise the possibility of future evidence and counter-arguments, and not sound absolutely confidently definite. This writer goes too far the other way, though, and “not bizarre” is a very weak claim. If your argument's good, recognise it's good and use your grammar and vocabulary to show its strengths – hedging is only about avoiding unreasonable arrogance.

The two passages can sound more academic as

Many aspects of organisational culture are observable, and a lot can be learnt about how a business operates from talking to current employees (Brocke & Sinni, 2009).

Whether one ideal structure exists for all organisations is debatable, but considering that most organisations' objectives are to be efficient, effective and profitable, the idea is at least plausible.

A few final issues

- Don't use idioms and cliches (e.g. "sound like a broken record", "no use crying over spilt milk"); these are stale ways of hiding ideas and avoiding clear thought. If your idea's good, don't fall back on someone else's way of saying it.
- Don't use similes (e.g. "fast as lightning") and metaphors (e.g. "many mountains to climb"); these always increase the danger of misunderstanding and tend to only be there for dramatic effect – which in academic writing shouldn't be needed.
- Don't use rhetorical questions (e.g. "what does war ever achieve?"); like metaphors, these always increase the danger of misunderstanding, especially where the reader answers them differently to you. If you want to make a point, just make it with a direct statement.
- Don't use too many abstract nouns. This is an easy mistake to make, but filling your grammar with too many concept-names can make it complicated for the writer and difficult for the reader. "The prevalence of debate over the existence of an ideal structure for organisations shows no abatement" is a much worse sentence than "Whether there is one ideal structure for all organisations is still being debated". The simpler version is more direct and easier to understand exactly, while communicating the same idea – that is, it's more academic.