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General Writing 2

Formal Writing and Style

Focus: How to sound sophisticated in your writing



Writing formally

What makes a piece of writing sound formal/sophisticated?



Use of formal language

Exercise 1: Examine the two texts in the handout

Make a list of differences:

Formal writing is (or has)....

Longer sentences

More passive voice

Citations

Shorter transitions no question transitions

Clear parallel structures

“Formal,” precise words

No abbreviations

Less redundancy -concise

Focus for this session

Formal vocabulary choices

- Vague or informal adjectives
- Imprecise or informal verbs or use of phrasal verbs
- Informal transitions or questions as transitions
- Wrong or imprecise expressions and nouns

Weak adjectives

Avoid weak adjectives such as *good, nice, poor, or bad* as in

“This research is good.” or “This poor work represents....”

Use a thesaurus or synonyms in MS WORD

Formal/sophisticated adjectives

Exercise 2: What is the more formal word?

1. As a result of this research, *good* / *considerable* progress has been made.
2. Although the research is *sort of* / *somewhat* scarce on this issue,
3. *Not many* / *Few* studies have considered the correlation between....
4. Smith's *preliminary* / *beginning* study shows *good* / *positive* / *impressive* results in the areas of...

Formal adjectives

5. The results of this *poor/flawed* research are questionable.
6. The results of *many/numerous* studies indicate that..
7. The data show a *nice/significant* correlation between..

Use of adjectives to critique others' work

Exercise 3: “This *innovative, yet restricted* study produced questionable results.”

Positive

Important

Innovative

Careful

Significant

Elegant

Rigorous

Impressive

Novel/Unique

Neutral

Small

Exploratory

Preliminary

Modest

Accurate

Simple

Poor

Flawed

Unsatisfactory

Thin

Sloppy

Anecdotal

Restricted

Adverbs: Overuse of “very”

Avoid overuse of *very*

Instead of saying “It is **very** unlikely that” choose words such as *highly, extremely, rather, quite* .

It is highly likely that...

It is rather doubtful that ..

It is quite possible that...

Another formal adjective: **somewhat**

It is **somewhat** likely that

Other common formal adjectives:

Dramatic, substantial, significant, considerable

Adjectives/adverbs in claims

It is almost certain that

It is probable that

It is highly likely that

There is a strong possibility that

It is possible that

It is unlikely that

There is a slight possibility that

It is highly unlikely that

Formal adjectives

Avoid using *a lot* in formal writing. *Many* is a better choice than *a lot*, but it is also considered somewhat informal.

Use *several, various, or numerous* OR a specific number

Use *large* instead of *big* (more formal adjectives)

Avoid *different* simply to emphasize the plurality of a noun.
(avoid overuse) There are *many different* reasons.

Change to: There are *numerous* reasons. Or There are *many* reasons... There are *several* reasons...Or be **specific:**

There are four reasons..

Avoid filler words: basically, essentially, generally? In this respect ..., It can be said that..., In this context...

(Before our next point)

Noncount nouns

Research

Equipment

Technology (but types of technologies)

Evidence

Advice

Almost all -ing nouns (gerunds): writing, teaching

Vocabulary and Grammar

Harm

Faculty (as in faculty members)

(*Data* is an irregular countable plural noun and needs a plural verb)

Experience (overall, abstract) but experiences (individual times)

Work (meaning studies) is noncount; artworks (pieces of art)

Noncount nouns

Not much → little

Avoid *not much* with noncount nouns (research, work, evidence, focus, information...) To be more formal, use *little*.

The students *did not have much* difficulty with the assignment.

Change to: The students had *little* difficulty with the assignment.

Not much research has focused on the area of..

Change to: Little research has focused on

Count nouns

Not many → **few**

Avoid *not many* for countable nouns such as *studies, results, developments*; use *few* instead.

Not many students have studied the literature thoroughly.

Change to: *Few* students have studied the literature thoroughly.

These investigations have *not* produced *many* results.

Change to: These investigations have produced *few* results

Few vs. a few; little vs. a little

Few (not many) students have studied English at this level

A few (some) students came to class today

Little (not much) work has been done in this area.

A little (some) work has been done in this area.

Much more → far more

These results are *much more* reasonable than

Change to: These results are *far more*....

Another formal structure:

No studies have shown...,

To the best of our knowledge, no research has been conducted showing...

In context

Notice how these words are used in context

1. However, **little** information exists to support
2. However, **little** attention has been given
3. However, **few** quantitative measurements have been reported
4. However, **few** studies/investigations
5. **No** studies/data/calculations

Your sentence:

Adverbs

Try to place adverbs within the sentence instead of at the beginning or end of the sentence, except in instructions.

Instead of saying, “**Then** the system can be shut down.”

say “**The system can then be shut down.**”

Formal verbs

Avoid informal verbs such as *happen* → occur

Avoid two-word (phrasal) verbs “went up” → rose

Avoid *got*: “We got good results” → We obtained...”

get out → remove

put together → combine

take apart → separate

carry out → conduct

look at → examine, discuss, determine

Avoid contractions: can't → cannot

Formal verbs

Exercise 4. Choose more formal verbs.

1. He *carried out* the plans precisely according to the project instructions.

Implemented, performed, executed

2. He *started* the computer program.

executed, launched, ran, initiated, implemented,

3. They *depend on* research funds from the McKnight Foundation.

Rely on

4. They *improved* the program.

Renovated

Formal verbs

5. They *made* their plans very *clear* to the students.

clarified their plans

6. They *could not solve* the difficult conflict.

failed to resolve

7. This paper *tries* to show the results of....

attempts to show intends to..

8. The material *is made of*....

constructed of, consists of

9. We *need to get* the results in order to....

obtain

Formal verbs

10. The report shows that....**indicates, demonstrates, reveals, suggests**
11. They *did* a pilot study before starting the full research project. **conducted, implemented**
12. The results *show* a link between....**indicate, reflect, demonstrate**
13. The teacher cannot *help* the students unless they are willing to *get better*. **assist, improve**

Find formal verbs

Use your MS Word program (or talk together) to find synonyms or use the thesaurus

provide

device

convince

good

start

Use powerful verbs

Potentially, assessment of memory skills soon after adoption can become helpful for identifying the children who will benefit from early intervention programs.

Change to: Potentially, assessing memory skills after adoption helps identify the children who will benefit from early intervention programs.

Transitions

We carefully lead the reader from one idea to the next. We do not leave gaps between ideas.

We have several “cohesive devices”

o One-word transitions (*however*)

o Phrases (*Another example is...*)

o Sentence transitions between major ideas –

In spite of the difficulty using this method, there is a major advantage for the user.

o *This/these* + summary word

(several sentences introducing a concept)... **This concept** is

Informal

Exercise 5

But

And

Also,

So

Besides

Especially

Meanwhile

On the contrary

As a matter of fact/In
fact/Indeed

Generally speaking

Formal

However, Nevertheless

He also, In addition, Furthermore,
Moreover,

Therefore, Thus, Hence? As a result,
Consequently,

In addition, Alternatively,

Specifically, In particular
(Avoid -Not in academic writing)

In contrast, By contrast
(Avoid)

In general...

Other initial transitions to avoid

Actually, is only used to correct a previous fact or opinion. Generally avoid in academic writing, especially at the beginning of a sentence.

After all, does not mean “in summary” or “in conclusion” in English. Avoid in formal writing.

At last, does not have the same simple meaning as “Finally,” or “In conclusion.” Avoid in formal writing.

First of all, does not simply mean first. It is rarely used in formal writing, and to a native speaker, it can indicate a sense of anger or casual instructions.

Nowadays, is too casual for academic writing. Use “currently,” “recently,” or “X is increasingly being used as”, instead.

Problems with words showing type or amount

kind of, sorts of Use “type of” instead of “kind of,” “many kinds of,” or “many sorts of ...”

Exercise 6: EXAMPLE OF TRANSITIONS/cohesive

DIGITAL video now plays an important role in entertainment, education, and other multimedia applications. With hundreds of thousands of hours of archival videos, there is an urgent demand for tools that will allow efficient browsing and retrieving of video data [1], [20], [21]. In response to such needs, (or these needs) various video content analysis techniques using one or a combination of image, audio, and textual information present in video have been proposed to parse, index, and abstract massive amounts of data [1], [3], [15], [20]. Among these information sources, caption text present in the video frames plays an important role in understanding the content of a raw video sequence. For example, captions in news broadcasts and documentaries usually annotate information on where, when, and who of the reported events. More importantly, a sequence of frames with caption text is often used to represent highlights in documentaries. Also, (or In addition) captions are widely used to depict titles, producers, actors, credits, and sometimes, the context of a story. Furthermore, text and symbols that are presented at specific locations in a video image can be used to identify the TV station and program associated with the video. In summary, captions in video frames provide highly condensed information about the contents of the video and can be used for video skimming, browsing, and retrieval in large video databases.

Source: Zhong et al.: IEEE Transactions on Pattern Analysis and Machine Intelligence, Vol. 22, No. 4, p. 385 © IEEE 2000

Cohesive Device

This/these + summary word

Exercise 7

One of the predictors of increased violence against recent immigrants is the current economic situation and high unemployment. There will always be some citizens who have negative behavior towards foreign people, but with high unemployment and low economic growth, as we have today, strong nationalism and criminality tend to grow. As a result of **these factors**, immigrants become a target for those who need to have someone to blame for being jobless. **This situation** will only improve if we receive more information about cultures and

Exercise 8

1. Smith et al. (2010) noted that smoking among American teenagers has gone from 39% in 1999 to 20% in 2009. The authors claim that this dramatic _____ is directly correlated to the amount of money spent on smoking prevention programs in the schools.

decrease, change, downward trend

2. The US has always had relatively lax gun control laws because of pressure from gun lobby groups. In recent years, however, there has been increased pressure to pass stricter gun control legislation because the American murder rate using handguns has steadily increased. Table 1 compares the number of murders using handguns and other weapons in 2008. These _____ clearly show that handguns are the major weapons (59%) used in murders.

alarming numbers, data, statistics, surprising findings,

Exercise

3. An environmental activist group claims that people living within 10 miles of nuclear power plants may have a 30% higher risk of developing brain tumors than those who live further away. This _____ has not been consistently verified by studies.

assertion, claim

4. For several years, cell phone use has steadily increased around the world. As of 2011, the number of cell phones people own exceeded the number of land lines. Advancements in listening quality, technology, multiple use functions and convenience have all driven this _____.

trend, this increase

Use of longer transitions

Based on the above comparison, we argue that operations management researchers should be concerned with PLS for **three reasons**. **First**, PLS can significantly increase the relevance of operations management research through the development and testing of causal-predictive models.

Second, PLS is a highly effective technique for theory-driven explorative research in operations management. Operations management research deals with complex systems and processes, which are highly challenging in nature. (more details in the paragraph)

Third, PLS enables the use of formative indicators in operations management research. As mentioned earlier, formative indicators are quite different from reflective indicators.

Use a preview list and longer transitions in new paragraphs

We argue that operations management researchers should be concerned with PLS because it relates most closely with practice, it is a very effective technique in operations, and because it enables the use of formative indicators. *(preview list)* **First.....**

Another reason to be concerned with PLS is because it is a very effective technique in operations.

The third reason to be concerned with PLS is

Questions as Transitions

In most academic writing: Avoid questions as transitions

What does conflict mean?

Use statements instead:

It is unclear what the definition of conflict is

Several definitions of conflict have been used in previous studies.

It is questionable whether...

A key question is whether...

Social science and business may use questions more often

Other Formal Conventions

Avoid using *etc.*, *and so forth*, and *the like*.

Consider the following example:

“These special tax incentives are available in six European countries: France, Spain, Germany, etc.”

Change to:

... “*enacted in six European countries, including France, Spain, and Germany.*”

Only use etc. when there is a clear pattern

The series is 1, 3, 5, etc.

Such as or including?

IP law has several subcategories *such as/including* patent, copyrights and trademarks.

Use either *such as* or *including* for each of the following sentences:

1. Numerous personal factors are related to commitment to an organization ___*including/such as*___ gender, income, and education.
2. As for the factor of gender, statistics from major companies ___*including/ such as*_____ AT&T, General Motors, and Polaroid show that women are staying longer with companies as they climb the corporate ladder.

Such as = for example

Including = highlights the most important ones

by, using, via

The experiment was conducted
by/using/via several techniques.

Using + noun

By + -ing

Via (mostly avoid) – although more used
in British writing

Avoid overly formal British phrases if publishing in US journals

Shall	I will go, Should we go?
One	Use a noun (people, students)
Owing to	Because of the ... Due to the...
Hitherto	Hereafter
til	until
As per your request	As (you) requested
As (to mean since)	“As (Since) Six Sigma is the standard for our company, we will require... Six Sigma is the standard for our company, so/thus we will require...”
Keen interest	I am very (quite) interested in...

Punctuation of “however”

Traditional (literature, some social science)

Independent clause; **however**, independent clause.
(other words – moreover, therefore)

Business, science, engineering

Independent clause. **However**, independent clause.

No independent clauses: Clause, however, clause:

We have a hard time, however, with this concept.

We, however, had a hard time.

Examples

Transition words:

The computer crashed; however, we restored the data quickly.

The computer crashed. However, we restored the data quickly.

The computer crashed. We, however, restored the data quickly.

Use of dash

Usually considered a weak comma. Most academic writing avoids dashes

- o We had a hard time—as we expected.
- o We had a hard time, as we expected, but we endured.

Conjunctive transitions (*and, but, so, or*)

In the middle of a sentence, use a comma to divide two independent clauses.

The computer crashed, but we restored the data quickly.

The computer crashed, and we had to re-enter all the data.

The computer crashed but was not destroyed.

Note: This does not apply to clauses beginning with *because, since, or even though*.

Commas in lists

Use commas between all items in a list in academic writing that should be separated:

I leave my money to Mark, Jamie and Heidi.

I leave my money to Mark, Jamie, and Heidi.

Which items go together?

We bought materials from Johnson and Johnson,
Phisher, and Bayer Company.

Use of the colon for lists

Use a colon if the clause before the : is an independent clause.

We used the following elements: _____, _____, and _____.

OR

There were three variables:;; and

The elements were _____, _____, and _____. (no colon because it does not have an independent clause before the list.)

Use of Colons

There are three elements **as follows**:

There are three elements **as in the following (list)**:

1.
2.

Hyphens for adjectives

If two adjectives together modify a noun (and come before the noun), use a hyphen unless the word is an adverb.

No hyphen: I live in a old large brown house.

Hyphen: There has been a long-term problem in this university.

No hyphen: It is an internally initiated memo.

No hyphen: The problem is long term.

More examples

5-minute interview (or five-minute interview)

two-tier system

twenty-two-mile run

5-week-old baby (or five-week-old baby)

three-year-old child

state-of-the-art equipment

3-gig memory

A carefully chosen sample

One more convention!

American English

- o Commas and periods go **INSIDE** “ “ marks
- o Quotation marks are double marks “ “ Single marks only go inside double marks “’ ‘
- o The authors noted that the topic was a “big white elephant.” However, we disagree with this perspective and think it is not “a big white elephant,” but it is a normal topic of conversation.

British English – commas and periods go outside.

Quotation marks are single marks ‘ ‘

Tomorrow

More specific seminars on polishing
published work



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