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
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.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Poor</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Important</td>
<td>Small</td>
<td>Flawed</td>
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<tr>
<td>Innovative</td>
<td>Exploratory</td>
<td>Unsatisfactory</td>
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<tr>
<td>Careful</td>
<td>Preliminary</td>
<td>Thin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significant</td>
<td>Modest</td>
<td>Sloppy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Elegant</td>
<td>Accurate</td>
<td>Anecdotal</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rigorous</td>
<td>Simple</td>
<td>Restricted</td>
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<tr>
<td>Impressive</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Novel/Unique</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
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...
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 (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”

- One-word transitions (*however*)
- Phrases (*Another example is...*)
- Sentence transitions between major ideas – *In spite of the difficulty using this method*, there is a major advantage for the user.

- *This/these* + summary word

(several sentences introducing a concept)... *This concept is*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Informal</th>
<th>Formal</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Exercise 5</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>But</td>
<td>However, Nevertheless</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And</td>
<td>He also, In addition, Furthermore, Moreover,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Also,</td>
<td>Therefore, Thus, Hence? As a result, Consequently,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>So</td>
<td>In addition, Alternatively,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Besides</td>
<td>Specifically, In particular</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Especially</td>
<td>(Avoid -Not in academic writing)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meanwhile</td>
<td>In contrast, By contrast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On the contrary</td>
<td>(Avoid)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As a matter of fact/In fact/Indeed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generally speaking</td>
<td>In general...</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
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, 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, 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.

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,
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.
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. 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
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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>British Phrase</th>
<th>English Alternative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shall</td>
<td>I will go, Should we go?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One</td>
<td>Use a noun (people, students)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Owing to</td>
<td>Because of the ...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hitherto til</td>
<td>Hereafter, until</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As per your request</td>
<td>As (you) requested</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As (to mean since)</td>
<td>“As (Since) Six Sigma is the standard for our company, we will require...”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keen interest</td>
<td>I am very (quite) interested in...</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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

- We had a hard time— as we expected.
- 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 **ly** word.

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

- Commas and periods go INSIDE “ “ marks
- Quotation marks are double marks “ “ Single marks only go inside double marks “ ..........’ ‘ .............”

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
For additional help with your writing, visit the SFL - Academic Writing Center
MM Building 3rd floor
http://www.awc.metu.edu.tr