The following list of “dos and don’ts” for academic writing is a general list of recommendations. These rules will not apply equally across the disciplines or even from class to class within the same discipline. When in doubt, you should always check with your professor, ask someone in the department if there are writing guidelines available for students in your department, or check the style of a respected journal in your field.

**The “Dos”**

**Write in a clear, “plain” style.** Avoid “flowery” language at all costs! If necessary, throw out your Thesaurus! Readers are more impressed by the quality of your ideas than your use of multi-syllabic terms. 

*Exception: when appropriate, use jargon common in your field.*

Avoid “fantastic,” “great,” “wonderful,” “terrific,” “amazing,” “incredible”

**Use active voice.** Put your verbs to work for you and use direct, clear sentences.

**Vary your sentence structure.** Readers get tired when they read a series of lengthy sentences with multiple clauses. Similarly, they feel rushed by a series of short, terse sentences. As much as possible, vary the length and construction of your sentences.

**Use consistent tenses.** Present tense is most common in academic papers, and should be used when referring to written texts. Future tense is almost never used.

*Exception: past tense is used in history papers and in reference to experiments done in the past.*

"Thompson describes an experiment in which..."

(not “Thompson described an experiment in which...”)

**Have someone else read your paper before you turn it in!** All writers get very involved in their own ideas and need an outside reader to provide feedback.
The “Don’ts”

Don’t use first person pronouns ("I," "we," "me," "us," "my," and "our"). Most readers know who is writing the paper, so you do not ever have to refer to yourself.

Exceptions: some academic writing requires the use of first-person pronouns: reflection papers, ethnographic studies, etc.

Tip: Never use the word “you”!

Avoid imperatives such as "Consider the following..." or "Imagine that..." or "Take, for example, ...." These have an implied "you".

Do not use contractions. This rule is stylistic and the goal is a “cleaner” paper. There are many exceptions to this rule and the best thing to do is check with the professor.

Tip: “cannot” is one word and “[a lot]” is two words!

“Although” is preferable to "though"

Don’t use archaic terms. “Thus” and “alas” are not terms utilized in common English and should not be used in your academic paper!

Don’t use slang. Though academic writing should use common English terms, it is not casual writing.

“mathematics,” “children,” “numerous” or “many,” “frightening,” rather than "math," "kids," "lots," "scary."

Don’t use clichés. Be careful – clichés are easy to use. For example, “too little, too late” seems full of meaning, but it is considered vague and cliché in an academic paper.

Don’t use qualifiers (“really,” “very,” “surely,” “often,” “hopefully,” “basically,” etc.). These terms make your paper sound unsure and tentative. Delete these words for a stronger, more direct paper.

Avoid overused “scholarly” phrases. Never write “In this paper I will …” You are writing the paper and will clearly do something. There’s no need to say you will do something – just do it!

And never write “In conclusion …” This is an overused transition to the conclusion. The reader should know they are at the conclusion of your paper based on the content of the concluding paragraph.

Why are these clichés? Apart from the fact that they appear in almost every FS paper that I have ever read (seriously!), they state the obvious: “technology” includes every tool, every process, every technique invented by humans, and it has been growing (“expanding,” “increasing,” ...) for thousands of years. Think of the invention of the alphabet, the cultivation of plants, the printing press, pencils, the telegraph, nail clippers, zipper pulls, and so on—it is ALL technology.

If you want to refer to a particular kind of technology, you must qualify it: "digital technology," "communication technology," "the technology of social media," and so on. But please resist the temptation to say that they are "increasing"!

- Will Wilkinson

"Technology is increasing..." "Technology is growing exponentially..."

"With our ever-expanding technology..."
5.5 How to write in an academic style

From De Montfort University, Leicester, England

1. Create an objective, confident voice

Use the third person (this means not using 'I')

Most of the time you will be expected to use the third person as it enables you to show that you are being objective.

You could try using:

- This essay discusses the importance of ...
- This research shows that ...
- It could be said that ...

Consider your use of tenses

You need to be clear about whether you are discussing something that happened in the past or something that is having an impact upon the present.

The present tense:

- Smith's argument illustrates that ...
- Freud's theory supports the view that...

The past tense:

- The Industrial Revolution had an impact upon society in a number of different ways.
- The interviews were conducted with a group of parents in the Leicestershire area.

2. Use appropriate language for your audience and purpose

Academic writing need not be complicated, but it does need to have an element of formality. Your choice of words for an academic assignment should be more considered and careful.

Avoid contractions

- Rather than; 'don't', 'can't', 'it's', 'should've',
  You could try: 'do not', 'cannot', 'it is', 'should have'

Use the full forms of words

- Rather than: 'TV', 'memo', or 'quote' You could try: 'television', 'memorandum' or 'quotation'

Avoid using informal words

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• Rather than: Smith's bit of research is ok.  
  You could try: Smith's research is  
  significant because ...
• Rather than using words such as: 'get', 'got' or 'a lot'  
  You could try: 'obtain', 'obtained' or 'many'

3. Be clear and concise

Keep words simple:

• Rather than: The denotation was obfuscated by the orator.  
  You could try: The meaning was hidden by the speaker.

Aim for the right word for the right occasion:

• Example 1: Crusade against crime  
• Example 2: Campaign against crime  
  The word 'crusade' has connotations of a battle and is more aggressive in tone than the word  
  'campaign'. 'Campaign' implies a more considered approach

Make every word count:

• Rather than: The theorist called Sigmund Freud wrote a significant piece of work called On  
  Narcissism which offers valuable insights into ...  
  You could try: Freud (1914) offers valuable insights into ...

Avoid any vague words or phrases:

• Ensure that your reader knows who or what you are referring to when you use words such as:  
  'it', 'them', 'they'.  
• Words such as 'people' and 'ideas' have the potential to be vague. So, avoid saying: 'according to  
  many people'. Ensure that you explain which people or which ideas.  
• When talking about events that have happened in the past, avoid phrases such as: 'in the past' or  
  'in recent times'. You need to be specific.

Avoid using clichéd phrases:

• A cliché is a phrase or expression that is overused to such an extent that it losess its value. For  
  example, 'as bright as a button' or as 'clear as mud'.

4. Use language sensitively

Avoid expressing strong opinions too directly Academic writing is concerned with presenting your  
discussion in an objective way, so there is no need to assert your opinions too strongly

• Rather than: Smith has an extremely important point to make because  
  You could try: Smith's view is significant because ...
So avoid words like: 'very', 'really', 'quite' and 'extremely'.

**Lean towards caution**

We need to be aware that our views are contributing to a much wider debate surrounding your given topic. Your use of language must show that you are making suggestions which contribute to this wider discussion:

- Rather than: 'This view is correct because ...'
- You could try: 'It could be said that ...', 'It appears that ...', 'It seems that ...'

**Avoid using taboo language**

- In academic writing it is important not to offend your reader – you want her/him to trust your judgment and authority. Using swear words or making offensive comments will upset the balance of your writing and undermine your point of view.

**Do not stereotype, generalise or make assumptions**

- This especially applies to individuals or groups on the basis of their gender, race, nationality, religion, physical and mental capacity, age, sexuality, marital status, or political beliefs.

Your use of language should always remain neutral.

- Rather than: fireman or policeman Try using: fire fighter or police officer
- Rather than: mankind
  
  Try using: humankind