

Writing Tips for International Students

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Rhetorical Strategies

The word "rhetorical" has many different shades of meaning, but they all point toward a similar definition—successfully connection with and persuasion of your audiences. For college and university students, those audiences are usually professors and other course instructors. Some strategies are unique to a subject area, but there are many basic strategies that work in all academic contexts:

Start big and get small. Make sure the first paragraph summarizes everything that you plan to discuss in the rest of your paper. At the beginning of each subsequent paragraph, make sure the first sentence covers everything you plan to discuss in the rest of the paragraph.

Enrich your vocabulary. A more sophisticated vocabulary can boost the effectiveness of your writing. Use a thesaurus to find synonyms and related words for concepts you already know. After finding a new word, make sure it is a good choice by asking someone whether the word works in the context that you are writing about. If you are not in a position to do this, type the word into a search engine like Google, and see how others have been using it.

Keep your language neutral. During your studies, it is likely that you will have the opportunity to write about topics that inspire or infuriate you. Regardless of your passion for a topic, academic audiences prefer clear, precise, and neutral descriptions to emotional or moralistic language. For example:

Adolf Hitler was a monster who was responsible for the deaths of millions.

This is a statement that an overwhelming majority of people would agree with, but saying that he was a monster tells readers more about your response to Hitler than about Hitler himself. When academic readers see this, it leads them to believe that you cannot help imposing your attitudes on a subject. A more neutral and persuasive way of writing would be:

Adolf Hitler was responsible for the deaths of millions.

Do not be extreme. Academic readers are often suspicious of superlative claims. These are statements that begin with “the most” or “the least” or end with “–est,” and are applied to all situations. You can make it less extreme by narrowing the situations in which the statement is true. For example, instead of writing

New Horizons is the fastest spacecraft ever built.

it would be more restrained (and accurate) to write

As of 2007, New Horizons is the fastest spacecraft ever built.

You can also quantify, rather than relying on a superlative:

New Horizons is traveling at 16.21 kilometers per second.

Find opportunities to be critical. Often (though not always) instructors are eager for evidence that their students are thinking and writing critically. In this case, being critical does not necessarily mean criticizing, but instead means to question, to interrogate. In other words, don't accept things at face value. Writing critically means to look carefully at a subject, and to ask tough questions about different aspects of it. Bring in different perspectives and talk about how they view the subject. Being critical also means not believing something because of a person's high status; even if a writer you found in your research is very prominent, that does not mean that they are right. Interrogate them just as thoroughly as you would an unknown writer.

Directness

Academic writing in North America has often been described as “direct.” This can mean two things: 1) dealing immediately with the topic at hand without extra information; 2) using clear and precise language to describe even the most uncomfortable and taboo subjects. Direct writing will be seen by professors and other readers as lean and efficient. Follow these strategies to make your writing more direct:

- Create an outline of your text before writing, and compare your early drafts with the outline. If a word or a sentence does not contribute to any of the points in your outline, remove it.
- When you review your early drafts, look for ways to make your sentences shorter, but without removing any important meanings from them. If you can do this, then make them shorter.
- Look for euphemisms (mild or vague expressions for something that is uncomfortable to talk about). If you find any euphemisms, change them to clearer language.

Using "I," "We," and "You"

The differences between spoken and written academic English become very clear in the ways that first- and second-person pronouns are used. Underlying these differences are two basic characteristics of all academic writing: 1) the readers of academic writing tend to be more interested in the insights that a writer has to offer than in the person who is offering the insights, and 2) these readers value precision.

Although you may have been told that "I" is never used in academic writing, that is not true. It is okay to use it, but only if the "I" is a vital part of the thing that is being discussed. For example, a student conducted a chemistry experiment and is reporting on the procedure. If the student is writing a paper for a chemistry class, the people reading it are probably not interested in who did it; they are interested only in the chemical phenomenon. She would remove the "I" by writing in the passive voice:

The pH level of the acid was raised by adding water.

However, if her readers were more interested in the writer and her experiences than in the chemical phenomenon, then it would be okay to use "I":

I raised the pH level of the acid by adding water.

The first-person plural pronoun "we" (and "us" and "our") is used even less frequently. The problem lies in the fact that it often is not clear who "we" represents. Take the following example, written by one student working by himself:

We have become accustomed to commercialization in sports.

If this had been written by a group of people working together, then "we" could refer to all the writers together. But this is only one writer, working alone. So who is "we"? Maybe the writer was referring to himself and his readers together—but he cannot know who is reading the paper, and it might be that one of the readers disagrees with him. Since there is no clearly defined group here, it would be best to change it so that it is more accurate:

Many people have become accustomed to commercialization in sports.

"You" is almost entirely non-existent in academic writing, again because it is not clear who will be reading a text, so the writer cannot accurately account for each and every reader.

It seems to be the easiest way to meet people in your own community.

It is common to use "you" this way while speaking, but it since it is so imprecise, academic readers generally do not like it. A common strategy is to replace "you" with "one":

It seems to be the easiest way to meet people in one's own community.

If a writing situation calls for direct instructions on how to do something, rather than describing or arguing for something (as is the case in this resource), it is okay to use "you."