

Original Paper

Addressing the Informality Problems in Academic Writing: A Case Study of an MA Student

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Abstract

This paper examines the challenges faced by an MA student in achieving higher scores in academic assignments due to the use of informal language. The study identifies specific informal features that hinder the student's performance in academic writing. Through a small-scale research study involving a face-to-face interview and analysis of assignment excerpts, the paper explores the underlying causes of informality in academic writing and proposes practical solutions to enhance formal academic expression. The discussion is framed within the context of the student's academic literacy background, including the C1-level English proficiency and the assessment criteria. The paper concludes with targeted recommendations to help the student and similar learners improve their academic writing by adhering to formal register conventions.

Keywords

academic writing, informality, formal academic expression

1. Introduction

This essay is going to solve an academic writing problem that an MA student faces in the assignment writing by identifying the informal features in academic writing with some solutions. A small research study was conducted before the analysis. The problem was collected from the student by face to face interview and some issues were collected from student's assignments. The whole procedure was processed with the student's consent. In this essay, a brief introduction of the student's academic literacy context and a description of the problem will be introduced. Then, a literature review about the concept of informality, causes of and solutions to this type of problem will be demonstrated. Finally, some practical suggestions will be given.

2. Academic Literacy Context

The student discussed in this essay is a Chinese student who studies on an MA Studies programme in a UK university. Her pre-enter IELTS assessment indicates that her English proficiency is C1. The one-year programme is delivered by the School of Education, which aims at giving no previous teaching experience students opportunities to gain the essential knowledge and skills in language teaching. It consists of compulsory and optional modules, covers topics from analyzing language learning and teaching to language teaching methodology, assessing language learning, and teaching academic English. The assessment of all the modules is a 3000/6000 words assignment. Students develop their assignments by following a common structure and all assignments are evaluated and marked according to the Taught Postgraduate Assessment Guide designed by the School of Education at the University of Leeds. Three main criteria: knowledge and understand, argument, and academic presentation are taken into account in taught postgraduate written work.

3. Academic Literacy Problem

The student who participates in this program struggles with the assignments and the problem is that the informal academic writing prevents her from achieving a higher score in assignments. To be specific, according to assessment criteria in light of academic presentation (see Appendix 1), score 42-48 is described as ‘word-choice and register may not be consistently appropriate to an academic text’ while score 52-58 is stated as ‘word-choice and register are generally appropriate to an academic text’. From the feedback in her assignment, regardless the good performance in presenting knowledge and argument, in terms of academic presentation, the informal words and expressions such as “you”, “we can find” and “what are the results?” lower her score and situate her score in a lower place. To tackle this problem, reasons and solutions will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

4. Literature Review

In this part, the concept of formality/informality and their relations will be discussed with related literature, followed by some studies which seek to identify types of informal features in different approaches. Lastly, causes along with solutions proposed by former researchers will be presented.

4.1 Formality and Informality

To define informality, it may be straightforward to start from the notion of formality. The concept of formality can be divided into “surface formality”, characterized by “attention to form for the sake of convention”, and “deep formality”, characterized by “attention to form for the sake of clear understanding” (Heylighen & Dewaele, 1999, p. 3). Since the fundamental purpose of language is communication, that to express one’s idea or deliver information clearly without obscurity and ambiguity (Grice, 1975), “deep formality” is the main concept to be widely explored. Heylighen and Dewaele (1999, p. 1) define “deep formality” as “avoidance of ambiguity by minimizing the context-dependence and fuzziness of expressions”. To explain it, in a shared context, unstated

background allows people to make simple expressions such as “they”, “he” and “here” and still can be understood by listeners or readers. However, in academic writing, the unshared background of knowledge requires an explicit expression that includes the necessary references, assumptions and information about the context to achieve formality. A fuzzy expression is that, for example, a “cold” weather can refer to both 0°C and -15 °C, so this word is ambiguous. Therefore, to avoid misinterpretation, context-dependent and fuzziness of expressions should be minimized. If formality is defined as a combination of precision and context-independent in expression, then informality can be defined as a combination of fuzziness and context-dependence. Heylighen and Dewaele (1999) note that “A formal style is characterized by detachment, accuracy, rigidity and heaviness; an informal style is more flexible, direct, implicit, and involved, but less informative” (1999, p. 1). It is similar to the notion of register developed by Halliday (1978) in his sociolinguistic theory. In this theory, register is concerned with the linguistic features of a text and the social context in which the text is used. Considering the field (the topic matter), tenor (the relationship between interactants), and mode (how the text is produced), it shows how language use varies from situation to situation. For example, in a research articles or an essay, it is expected to use the language in an accurate, objective way, which can be seen as a formal style, while in a text message between friends, the language is more involved, casual and context-dependent, which is an informal style. However, no expression can be absolutely formal or informal, all expressions are placed between these two extremes, so formality is a rational concept (Heylighen & Dewaele, 1999). Instead of seeing informality and formality as a language binary, it may be suitable to see them as a continuum. Coffin et al. (2003) also propose that if formality is ranked from the most formal (e.g., legal document) to the most informal (e.g., electronic mail between friends), most academic writing is near to the rank of legal document.

The advantages of formality, as Hyland and Jiang (2017) point out, in academic writing, formality helps to avoid being misinterpreted or persuasion being influenced by writers with various social characteristics. The guidebook (Swale & Feak, 2012) in academic writing also encourages students to write formally since formality enables writers to establish a distance between their personal feelings and their arguments, thus objectivity can be achieved, which is important in academic writing. However, informality cannot be regarded as an opposite of the academic stance of objectivity as informality in academic writing is a more personal tenor which helps to build a closer relationship between writers and readers and show a willingness to negotiate by “projecting a relaxed and approachable persona” (Hyland & Jiang, 2017, p. 41).

4.2 Features of Informality

There are several approaches to identify the informal/formal features in academic writing. Heylighen and Dewaele (1999) conclude that in a formal text, the frequency of the *nouns*, *adjectives*, *prepositions* and *articles* is expected to increase. In contrast, the frequency of the *pronouns*, *verbs*, *adverbs*, and *interjections* is expected to decrease. A formula (Heylighen & Dewaele, 1999, p. 13) which can measure formality, then, are proposed:

$F = (\text{noun frequency} + \text{adjective freq.} + \text{preposition freq.} + \text{articles freq.} - \text{pronoun freq.} - \text{verb freq.} - \text{adverb freq.} - \text{interjection freq.} + 100)/2$

The result of F will vary between 0 and 100 and it helps to show the degrees of formality in a straightway. In their following tests using data for English, French, Dutch, and Italian, for example, formality scores for Dutch language in oral female is 38.7, and in newspapers is 67.1, and for India language in essays is 69.1 while in newspapers is 71.6. These results contribute positively to confirming that this measure is available at least to English, French, Dutch, and Italian.

Similar to Heylighen and Dewaele's study that considering formality/informality is a more-or-less distributions, Biber (1988) conducted studies concerning the multi-dimensional analysis of register variation. By adopting factor analysis, seven factors and six dimensions of variation are categorized, among which the dimension 1 – “involved versus informational production”, correlates positively with informality and formality. The linguistic features grouped in “involved” includes *private verbs*, *THAT deletion*, *WH clauses* and *Do as pro-verb*, and the linguistic features seen as “informational” includes *nouns*, *agentless passives*, *prepositional phrases*, *attributive adjectives* and so on. These features “marking high informational density and exact informational content versus affective, interactional, and generalized content” (Biber, 1988, p. 107). It provides the guidance to clarify the concept of informality/formality, therefore, academic writing which is supposed to be high informational and less involved should contain more *nouns*, *prepositions*, and *attributive adjectives* and have fewer *final prepositions*, *second person pronouns*, and *WH clauses*.

Different from the two broad approaches mentioned above, Chang and Swale (1999) focused on a narrow perspective – style guides. In their studies, 40 style manuals and writing guidebooks that aim at teaching about how to employ specific grammatical features to achieve an appropriate degree of formality are analyzed, a list of ten most frequently mentioned informal features then are identified. However, since the different opinions toward the concepts of objective style and informality remain, disagreement over the usage of certain items have existed. In a recent study, considering personal teaching experience and consulting professional editors, Hyland and Jiang (2017) made one change in the list that substituting sentence fragments with second person pronouns, and the final list is presented in Table 1 with Chang and Swale's (1999) examples.

Table 1. List of Informal Features

1. First person pronouns to refer to the author(s) (I and we) e.g., “I will approach this issue in a roundabout way.”
2. unattended anaphoric pronouns (<i>this</i> , <i>these</i> , <i>that</i> , <i>those</i> , <i>it</i>) that can refer to antecedents of varying length e.g., “This is his raw material.”
3. split infinitives – an infinitive that has an adverb between <i>to</i> and the verb stem e.g., “The president proceeded to sharply admonish the reporters.”
4. Sentence initial conjunctions or conjunctive adverbs e.g., “And I will blame her if she fails in these ways.”
5. Sentence final preposition e.g., “A student should not be taught more than he can think about.”
6. listing expressions ('and so on', 'etc', 'and so forth' used when ending a list) e.g., “These semiconductors can be used in robots, CD players, etc.”
7. Second person pronouns/determiners to refer to the reader (you and your) e.g., “Suppose you are sitting at a computer terminal which assigns you role R”
8. contractions e.g., “Export figures won't improve until the economy is stronger.”
9. direct questions e.g., “What can be done to lower costs?”
10. exclamations e.g., “This is not the case!”

It has to be admitted that the informal features are not available to all academic genres. Among different disciplines, academic writing varies, for instance, a research report in Biology differs from an essay in Linguistics. Therefore, instead of seeing academic writing as “one size fits all”, university students have to learn to write in ways prescribed by their disciplines (Leedham, 2015), which means that it is unnecessary to rigidly adhere to that list since some informal features are acceptable within certain disciplines.

5. Possible Causes

There are various factors contribute to the use of informal expressions in academic writing and researchers have explored it from the perspective of culture, language, and personal experience.

With regard to the first person pronouns, according to Nelson and Castello (2012), the writer’s first language and cultural background may lead to such expressions as under their culture, first person pronouns do not carry the authority and personal projection. Petch-Tyson (1998) in her study found that the student whose first language is Dutch, Swedish, or Finnish used first person pronouns between two and four times more frequently than the English-speakers. In addition, Hyland (2002) in his study found that Chinese students are more likely to use “we” instead of “I” and he explains that the reluctant to present their personal views “may, in part, be a product of a culturally and socially constructed view of self which makes assertion difficult” (p. 1111). Indeed, in China, influenced by a collectivist culture, group consciousness is favored over individual opinions (Wei, 2004), hence students are willing to take a low-risk identity and avoid self-refer. The evidence can also be found in the student’s assignment, for example, “We can see...” “We think that...”. However, although first person pronoun is considered to be an informal expression in convention academic writing, views have changed over the decades and now it has been widely accepted. Hyland (2001) highlights the importance of “I” that it contributes positively to establishing an authorial identity and delivering an independent voice. In addition, “I” also helps to make the argument more persuasive and convincing in academic writing.

The frequent use of interrogative clauses (e.g., Why would that happen? Is this prediction true?) may due to the reason that students are exposed to speech more frequently than academic writing. The lectures and seminars delivered by speech, though in academic settings, are still different from academic writing. Since class sessions can be seen as an interface on an oral-literate continuum that contain the features of academic prose and face-to-face conversation (Csomay, 2006). It is common for lecturers to encourage students to express ideas and elicit various opinions by using direct questions. Without sufficient discrimination between spoken and written registers, students are more likely to employ speech-like expressions in their academic writing. Another possible explanation for the tendency of using interrogative clauses may in part due to the impact of IELTS writing (Leedham, 2015). Students who want to study in a UK university must make an application with the evidence of English language proficiency such as IELTS, particularly for Chinese students, most of them took this examination before entering into their universities. Leedham (2015) notes that on account of the nature

of writing that test-takers should give opinions towards some general problems and make arguments about social issues, students tend to employ interrogative clauses and imperative clauses in IELTS writing. Therefore, the former writing habits lead to informal expressions in their following academic writing. In addition, this finding also generates the arguments that IELTS tests may cause a potential burden to students in their further academic study.

Recognizing the difficulty in using the appropriate style in academic writing, Swale and Feak (2012) propose a **vocabulary shift** strategy, which helps to choose a verb, noun, or other parts of speech in the more formal form. Examples extracted from Swale and Feak's book (2012, pp. 15-17) are demonstrated below.

- 1) Verb. Replace Verb + preposition with a single verb.

Researchers *looked at* the way strain *builds up* around a fault. (less formal style)

Researchers *observed* the way strain *accumulates* around a fault. (academic style)

- 2) Avoid addressing the reader as "you".

You can see the result in Table 1.

The result can be seen in Table 1.

- 3) Limit the use of direct question.

What can be done to lower costs?

We now need to consider how costs may be lowered.

- 4) Place adverbs within the verb.

Then the solution can be discarded.

The solution can *then* be discarded.

6. Solutions

Based on the previous review of the literature and with the consideration of informality problems in the student's assignment that I found, proper solutions that may be suitable for the MA students' context are demonstrated below.

6.1 Ways to Identify Informal Features

From the literature discussed above, one of the reasons that students employ inappropriate expressions in academic writing is that they are unable to discriminate the differences between spoken and written registers. In addition, under different contexts, the criteria for informality varies. According to the feedback from the student, for example, in Chinese undergraduate universities, students are not encouraged to use first person pronouns and the occurring of "I" in the dissertation is not acceptable. However, in the context of MA in the UK, presenting ideas with "I" is highly embraced. Therefore, the informal features in a certain context should be identified, and both teachers' and students' efforts are needed. Although Chang and Swale (1999) have identified a list of informal features from a general perspective which could be a useful reference, within disciplines, it is necessary to make flexible adjustments.

For teachers, they could pick out some typical inappropriate word-choice or register that appears in students' assignments as examples thus this provides opportunities for students to recognize the unacceptable elements in academic writing that they did not realize in their former writing. To be specific, the in-session programme in MA Studies which aims at providing academic writing assistance can consider collecting inappropriate expressions from one module's assignment feedback comments, after selecting out the common problems, then listing them out as a checklist for students. For instance, the feedback I find in the student's assignment stated that "use of personal pronouns, use 'I' and be clear 'we' – learners, educators etc. Be careful about speaking on behalf of others", "better say 'in summary', not 'in sum up'". By picking them out, not only this student but also other students can notice the improper expressions.

As for students, students should be encouraged to read articles or literature related to their field and publications from their tutors. During reading, apart from understanding contents, paying particular attention to language features and expressions employed by the authors. After that, students can look through their last piece of writing and highlight any informal elements. In doing so, students are able to get familiar with the academic writing style and be aware of the differences in word-choice and register between them and professionals.

6.2 Tools for Avoiding Informality

To help students avoid informal expressions in academic writing, some supplement tools and resources can be adopted. Apart from the vocabulary shift strategy proposed by Swale and Feak (2012), some books such as *50 steps to improving your academic writing* (Sowton, 2012) also provide similar guidance with a comprehensive explanation. In this book, the major problems with informality are presented and analyzed with the comparison between informal and formal language. Moreover, a range of activities help learners to consolidate the knowledge, for example, one of the practices is asking learners to rewrite a small passage which contains instances of informal language by using a more academic style (see Appendix 2). Furthermore, there are some accessible websites (see Appendix 3) are designed to support students' academic writing. The Manchester Academic Phrasebank provides examples of phrases that should be cautiously used in academic writing to minimize informality. The EAP Foundation website includes a list of 10 rules and a style checklist for academic writing. If students struggle with the word-choice, then Griffith University has a website for academic vocabulary to check.

7. Conclusion

In summary, it has been shown from this essay that appropriate register and formal language play important roles in academic writing since it helps to establish an objective stance, make convincing statements and avoid misinterpretation. However, the influences from student's first language, culture and personal experiences pose obstacles for them to identify formal/informal expressions and the informality will cause negative impacts on their academic performance. The solutions which target on

the MA students' context employ the assistance from teachers and tools and students' self-help guidance, are expected to help students achieve formality in academic writing.

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Appendix 1

Criteria for academic presentation (School of Education in University of Leeds)

	7	21	35	42	45	48	52	55	58	62	65	68	72	75	78	85	91	97
Academic presentation: comprehensibility of language, skilled use of language, appropriateness of language, consistency of observation of citation / referencing conventions.	In-text citations and referencing incomplete and inconsistent in style. Tables and/or figures not included when appropriate. Word-choice and register are often inappropriate to an academic text.			In-text citations and / or reference list incomplete and / or inconsistent in style. Tables and/or figures not presented in line with accepted academic standards and/or lack relevance to the assignment text. Word-choice and register may not be consistently appropriate to an academic text.			In-text citations and reference list are complete. In-text citations and reference list in an appropriate style; may be occasional inconsistencies. Tables and/or figures presented in a way which is fully consistent with accepted academic standards and have some relevance. Word-choice and register are generally appropriate to an academic text.			In-text citations and reference list complete. In-text citations and reference list in an appropriate style, and fully consistent. Tables and/or figures presented in a way which is fully consistent with accepted academic standards and have significant relevance. Word-choice and register are consistently appropriate to an academic text.			In-text citation and referencing entirely consistent and appropriate. Tables and/or figures presented in a way which is fully consistent with accepted academic standards, have major relevance. Skilful word-choice and register appropriate to academic text.			Citation and referencing practices are comparable to that in publishable work. Tables and/or figures presented in a way which is fully consistent with accepted academic standards, have major relevance and show evidence of originality. Use of language comparable to that in publishable work		

Appendix 2

50 Steps To Improving Your Academic Writing. (Sowton, 2012)

How can I make my essays more formal?

'High thoughts must have high language.'
Aristophanes

STEP 21

UNIT 8

A Reflection

Which of these three sentences would be most appropriate in an essay?

1. Informal language is a load of rubbish you should avoid as much as you possibly can.
2. Informal language is abysmal contumely which it is imperative to eschew whenever feasible.
3. Informal language is a negative concept which should be avoided whenever possible.

Contextualization

Fill in the blank spaces in the table below, which emphasizes specific differences between informal and formal English.

Informal English	Formal English	Rule
you can see from this graph that ...	this graph shows that ...	Pronouns - especially first- and second-person pronouns - are associated with less formal English.
a bit; a lot of		Formal language should be more precise and of an appropriate academic register.
I =	;	
not many		Often there is a more formal negative expression which can be used.
kids	children	
don't; there's		Full forms, rather than contractions, are used in academic writing.
do again; look into		
A1	excellent; first-rate	
Why did this happen? [question expecting an answer]	Why, therefore, did this happen? [no answer expected]	
at the end of the day		Cliches should be avoided in academic writing.

C Analysis

What are students' major problems with informality?

The idea of formality is one of the key features of academic English. This said, it is also important to note that while informality in academic English should be avoided, so should over-formality. In part A, just as sentence 1 is too informal for academic writing, sentence 2 is too formal. Sentence 3 has a good balance and is appropriate.

Whereas other steps have looked at macro-level issues, such as academic style (see Step 2), this step concentrates on the micro-level - at language and grammar choices. The list below identifies ten common areas where students face difficulties. As you read, tick the box which says 'this applies to me' if informality has been a problem for you in your previous essays.

Pronouns ✓ this graph shows that ✗ you can see from this graph that
Pronouns are relatively uncommon in academic English. Both the second-person pronoun you and the first-person I (discussed in more detail in Step 22) are seldom used. Third-person pronouns (especially it) are used occasionally.
This applies to me. ☐

Unspecific language ✓ somewhat; considerable/significant ✗ a bit; a lot of
Precision is a key aspect of academic writing. Words which are very general, and which can have many different meanings, should not be used. Other expressions which should be avoided include stuff, thing and sort of. Step 37 focuses on vague and redundant language in more detail.
This applies to me. ☐

Punctuation ✓ ; [] ✗ I -
There are some punctuation marks which are considered to be more informal (e.g., the exclamation mark (!) and the dash (-)), and these are generally not used in academic English. Certain punctuation marks (e.g., the semicolon (;) or square brackets []) are, however, used more frequently. See Step 43 for full details.
This applies to me. ☐

Negative forms ✓ few ✗ not many
Other informal negative forms include not much (a more formal equivalent would be little) and not any (no). It is generally better to use the construction positive verb + negative adjective rather than negative verb + positive adjective e.g., is bad (rather than is not good) or has been unrealistic (as opposed to has not been realistic).
This applies to me. ☐

Slang words ✓ children ✗ kids
SLANG words are words which are not considered 'standard' in a language, or are considered more typical in the spoken form of a language. Such words, as well as text excluder (see Step 2), should be avoided in academic writing.
This applies to me. ☐

Slang	Formal
etc.	and so on
really	extremely
more and more	increasingly
nowadays	currently
like	such as

Contractions ✓ do not/there is ✗ don't/there's

Contracted forms (where apostrophes are used to show that sounds and letters have been omitted) are not appropriate in academic writing. Full forms should always be used. This applies to me. ☐

Multi-part verbs ✓ repeat/examine ✗ do again/look into

Multi-part verbs (often known as **PHRASAL VERBS**) are generally a feature of speech or non-academic writing. In almost every instance, a one-word verb equivalent exists. Some examples are presented in the table on the right (with many more available in Appendix 3, Step 21). Similarly, many students often use the construction *do/make + noun* instead of a one-word verb (e.g., *do an evaluation* rather than *evaluate*). This applies to me. ☐

Multi-part verb	One-word verb
take away	remove
give back	return
go down	decrease
go up	increase
look up to	admire
break up	split

Idioms ✓ excellent, first-rate ✗ A1

As with **SLANG**, an idiom is a **NEUTRATIVE** word or phrase – i.e., its literal meaning can be difficult to understand from its components. The idiom which is most overused in academic writing is perhaps *on the one hand ... on the other hand*. Since one of the main goals of academic writing is to avoid **AMBIGUITY**, idioms should not be used. This applies to me. ☐

Direct questions ✓ Why, therefore, did this happen? ✗ Why did this happen?

Direct questions should be avoided in academic writing (except in your title). A **RHETORICAL QUESTION**, meanwhile, may be used. This type of question does not expect an answer, and tends to be used in order to raise awareness of a particular issue. In some subjects, however (especially sciences), **RHETORICAL QUESTIONS** may be viewed as being informal, and they should therefore be avoided. This applies to me. ☐

Clichés ✓ in conclusion ✗ at the end of the day

A cliché is a word or expression which has been used so much that it has lost its original meaning. Often a cliché is also an **OXE**. According to the Oxford English Corpus, the following are the most commonly used clichés in English:

back on track	the fact of the matter	in the final analysis
few and far between	a level playing field	when all is said and done
in this day and age	to all intents and purposes	

This applies to me. ☐

D Activation

The following passage contains several instances of informal language. Rewrite it in a more formal, academic style.

You might think that the sort of words you use in academic writing is not important. But nowadays, it's becoming really important for you to choose your language and grammar carefully. The fact of the matter is that many students are influenced by the writing style of mags and papers! They just do the same.

E Personalization

- Ensure that you have checked through the ten problem areas in part C and ticked the ones that apply to you. Consider the relevant strategies for solving these problems.
- Look through your last piece of writing and highlight any informal grammar or language which you used.
 - How could you resolve these issues?
- Think about academic style in your home university system, focusing particularly on the categories in part C. There will probably be a number of similar areas.

F Extension

- Step 1 looks at the difference between writing and speaking (which is more informal); similarly, Step 2 focuses on the difference between standard writing and academic writing. Step 37 analyzes ways in which you can avoid using vague and unnecessary words, the use of which is informal.
- Step 43 focuses on **punctuation**, in particular the kind of formal punctuation which is used in academic writing.
- Appendix 3, Step 21 lists commonly used phrasal verbs alongside their single-verb, more academic equivalents.

Should I use I in my writing?

'Of all the words in all languages I know, the greatest concentration is in the English word "I".'

Elias Canetti

A Reflection

Answer the following questions about the use of *I* in academic writing.

- How often do you use *I* in your academic writing?
- Do you know of any rules for using *I* in your particular subject area?
- Is it acceptable to use *I* in academic writing in your mother tongue?

B Contextualization

Look at the following uses of first-person pronouns in academic writing.

- Decide whether you think they are acceptable or unacceptable. Justify your answer.

Sentence	Acceptable?	Explanation
I argue there are four main areas that distinguish academic writing from other types of writing.	✓	<i>I</i> is sometimes used in thesis statements in order to express the main focus of your essay.
I argue in favour of Sowton (2012) in my essay.		
In the lecture, I was particularly interested in the section on academic writing.		
I interviewed 48 students to understand where they had most problems.		
I think Sowton (2012) is wrong for three main reasons.		
In particular, I would like to thank my tutor, who helped me so much.		
I and others consider the arguments of Sowton (2012) to be unclear.		
I will now look at the issue of structure.		
From this, we can therefore understand Sowton's main argument.		

C Analysis

Why, in general, should *I* or *we* be avoided in academic writing?

Generally speaking, first-person pronouns (*I* or *we*, and their related forms such as *me* and *us*) are not used in academic writing. This is because good academic writing is based on what you can demonstrate rather than what you believe; it tends to be objective rather than subjective. When using *I* especially, one danger is that your writing is based on personal experience rather than on academic evidence.

In my country, academic writing does not follow these principles. Therefore, the argument is false.

First-person pronouns tend to be used more in certain academic subjects than in others. It is generally accepted that the first person is used less frequently in science subjects than any other.

For those situations where you need to avoid using the first person, there are a range of grammatical structures and phrases which can be used. Examples of 'subjective' sentences from part B are presented below, alongside appropriate rewrites.

First-person pronouns
Singular: *I* / *me* / *my* / *myself*
Plural: *we* / *us* / *our* / *ourselves*

The passive voice

English verbs can appear in either the active or the passive voice. The active voice is most commonly used in English, and it follows the usual **SUBJECT-VERB-OBJECT** structure. The passive voice can be used when you want to remove the subject, which can be extremely useful when the subject is *I* or *we*.

Original: *I* and others consider the arguments of Sowton (2012) to be unclear.

Depersonalized: Sowton (2012) is generally considered unclear.

Using an abstract term

One of the reasons why the first person is often not suitable in academic writing is because it is considered too direct. Instead of using *I* or *we* as a subject, an abstract term can be used instead.

Original: *I* argue in favour of Sowton (2012) in my essay.

Depersonalized: This article argues in favour of Sowton (2012).

This paper / article / essay ...
The researcher
This author / writer ...
The / this data ...

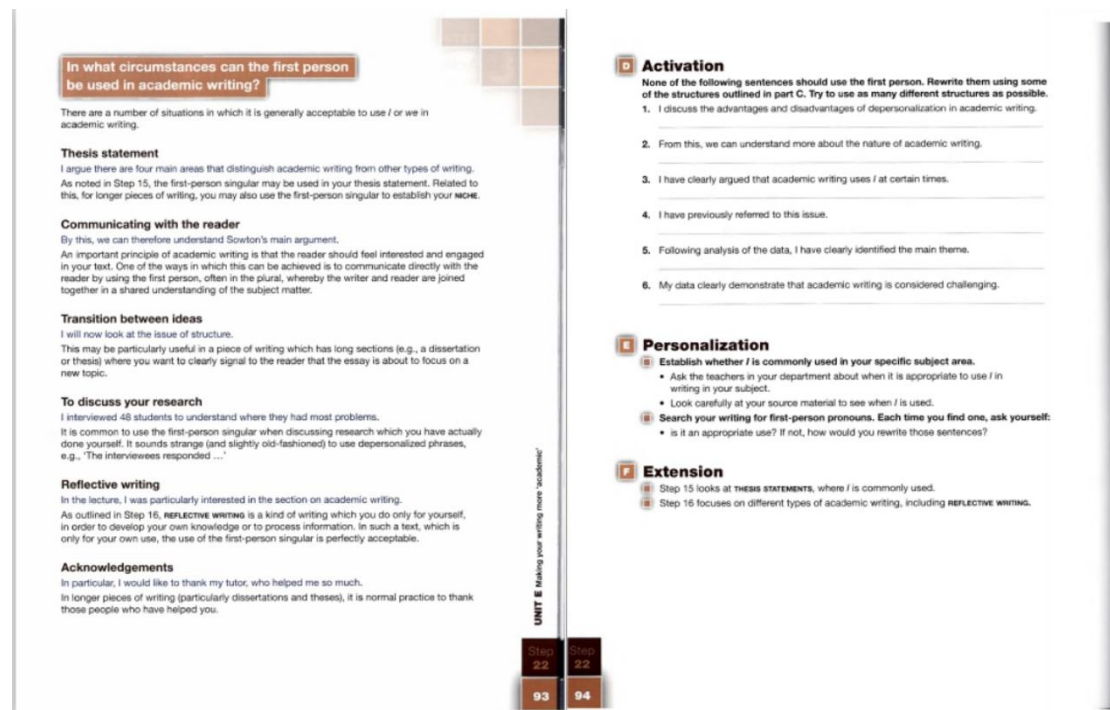
Impersonal expressions

A number of phrases exist in English whose function is simply to introduce other ideas. They have no meaning by themselves; their role is as a 'platform' for other language.

Original: *I* think Sowton (2012) is wrong for three main reasons.

Depersonalized: There are three main reasons why Sowton (2012) is wrong.

There is / There are ...
It is ...
One can ...



In what circumstances can the first person be used in academic writing?

There are a number of situations in which it is generally acceptable to use *I* or *we* in academic writing.

Thesis statement

I argue there are four main areas that distinguish academic writing from other types of writing. As noted in Step 15, the first-person singular may be used in your thesis statement. Related to this, for longer pieces of writing, you may also use the first-person singular to establish your **voice**.

Communicating with the reader

By this, we can therefore understand Sowton's main argument.

An important principle of academic writing is that the reader should feel interested and engaged in your text. One of the ways in which this can be achieved is to communicate directly with the reader by using the first person, often in the plural, whereby the writer and reader are joined together in a shared understanding of the subject matter.

Transition between ideas

I will now look at the issue of structure.

This may be particularly useful in a piece of writing which has long sections (e.g., a dissertation or thesis) where you want to clearly signal to the reader that the essay is about to focus on a new topic.

To discuss your research

I interviewed 48 students to understand where they had most problems.

It is common to use the first-person singular when discussing research which you have actually done yourself. It sounds strange (and slightly old-fashioned) to use depersonalized phrases, e.g., "The interviewees responded ...".

Reflective writing

In the lecture, I was particularly interested in the section on academic writing.

As outlined in Step 16, **REFLECTIVE WRITING** is a kind of writing which you do only for yourself, in order to develop your own knowledge or to process information. In such a text, which is only for your own use, the use of the first-person singular is perfectly acceptable.

Acknowledgements

In particular, I would like to thank my tutor, who helped me so much.

In longer pieces of writing (particularly dissertations and theses), it is normal practice to thank those people who have helped you.

Activation

None of the following sentences should use the first person. Rewrite them using some of the structures outlined in part C. Try to use as many different structures as possible.

1. I discuss the advantages and disadvantages of depersonalization in academic writing.
2. From this, we can understand more about the nature of academic writing.
3. I have clearly argued that academic writing uses *I* at certain times.
4. I have previously referred to this issue.
5. Following analysis of the data, I have clearly identified the main theme.
6. My data clearly demonstrate that academic writing is considered challenging.

Personalization

Establish whether *I* is commonly used in your specific subject area.

- Ask the teachers in your department about when it is appropriate to use *I* in writing in your subject.
- Look carefully at your source material to see when *I* is used.

Search your writing for first-person pronouns. Each time you find one, ask yourself:

- is it an appropriate use? If not, how would you rewrite those sentences?

Extension

- Step 15 looks at **THESE STATEMENTS**, where *I* is commonly used.
- Step 16 focuses on different types of academic writing, including **REFLECTIVE WRITING**.

UNIT 16 Making your writing more 'academic'

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Appendix 3

Websites links

- ◆ The Manchester Academic Phrasebank

<http://www.phrasebank.manchester.ac.uk/>

- ◆ The EAP Foundation

<https://www.eapfoundation.com/>

- ◆ Griffith University for academic vocabulary

<https://www.griffith.edu.au/international/englishhelp/academic-vocabulary>