10 TIPS FOR BETTER ACADEMIC WRITING

The Basics

Read Differently

Learn to recognize good writing. Read articles for structure and style, not just content. Understand that not all published articles are well-written.

How to tell: Good writing is easy to read and fades into the background. The reader's effort should be focused on understanding concepts, not writing style.

Write Simply and Clearly

Avoid excessive jargon, difficult syntax, and needlessly complex vocabulary. Do not write with flowery, sesquipedalian verbosity.

Example: Sesquipedalian verbosity is ironic.

Eliminate Unnecessary Words

Good writing comes from merciless editing. Excise unnecessary words when editing.

Example: *Including words that are unnecessary is often the result of a needlessly complex sentence structure*, vs. a complex sentence structure often results in unnecessary words.

Eliminate Adverbs

Most adverbs are vague and unnecessary. They rarely belong in academic writing.

Example: Rates of attrition are ~~incredibly~~ difficult to measure.

State Your Comparison Group

When using comparative forms (e.g., more, less, fewer, greater than), state your reference group explicitly.

Example: Rates of attrition were higher among low-income students~~:~~ *than among students with incomes above the federal poverty level.*

ADVANCED

Finish Your Thought

Do not assume that your reader is thinking the same way as you. Leave no thought unfinished.

Example: "The rate of graduate student attrition should be studied." *Why?*

One Paragraph, One Message

Each paragraph should have one clear message that you can articulate in one summary sentence.

Strategy: When editing, ask what one thing you want your reader to take from each paragraph.

Eliminate Unnecessary Details

Include only the details that a reader needs to understand your purpose and findings.

Example: Students often include details they think are interesting, but interesting does not mean relevant.

Choose Your Emphasis Wisely

What comes first in sentences, paragraphs, and sections is what is emphasized.

Example: "Graduate school attrition is unmeasured, unlike undergraduate programs." emphasizes the lack of data. "Unlike in undergraduate programs, graduate school attrition is unmeasured." emphasizes the comparison between groups.

Tailor to Your Audience

Great writing is focused on the reader. Every word choice, emphasis, and detail should be tailored to the audience's priorities.

Example: Great writing would (from the example above), emphasize the lack of data on graduate school attrition in a journal focused on graduate school but might emphasize the between-group comparison for a journal focused on all college students.