Skills Team Top Tips

Academic Writing

I. Write as clearly as possible.
You can use the academic books and journals you read as models to imitate. Ask yourself questions about the academic reading material, such as, how have the paragraphs been structured, or why particular words or expressions have been used?

2. Academic writing points out limitations.
Expressions such as “For the purpose of this essay, the following limited definition will be used: ...” or “The length of this essay means that only a limited number of examples can be discussed...” can be very useful to show you are aware of limitations in your writing.

3. Academic writing tends to be impersonal, objective and cautious.
Avoid sweeping statements or generalisations. Do not make direct statements that are impossible to back up. You can do this by choosing your vocabulary carefully... Some good words to insert into your writing to display caution are: “tends”, “suggests”, “could”, “may”, “might”, “possibly”, “probably” etc.

4. Use reliable sources.
It is most important that you always make sure you back up everything you say with evidence from a reliable source, unless it can be considered ‘common knowledge’. Whatever sources you have used they have to be accurately referenced.

5. Make your writing balanced.
When you can, it is important to include examples of ideas that disagree with what you are saying, as well as ones that support it. This will give your work ‘balance’ and show that you have read widely and thought about the subject from different angles.

6. Make sure your assignment overall has a clear overall structure.
A logical structure also needs to be evident throughout your academic writing, at the paragraph and sentence level.

7. Follow academic conventions.
Examples include: avoid writing in the first person ("I", “we” etc) unless you are writing a reflective assignment; avoid very long sentences; always write in full sentences; avoid informal words; avoid using “lazy” words such as “nice”, “get” or “stuff”.

8. Proofread.
Take the time to proofread your assignments carefully, for both content and structure. Be aware of issues to do with spelling and grammar and punctuation.

9. Practice!
Remember that ‘practice makes perfect’: the more you write in an academic style, the more natural it will become.

10. If your subject area guidelines contradict these tips then ignore the above and do what your tutors require!