

# ACADEMIC STYLE

The Academic Style is a prescriptive style that is prescribed by a **global** and **imagined** community that has **real expectations**.

It is **global** because English is the **foremost language** of science and academics. Therefore, differences of opinions on certain details are certain to arise.

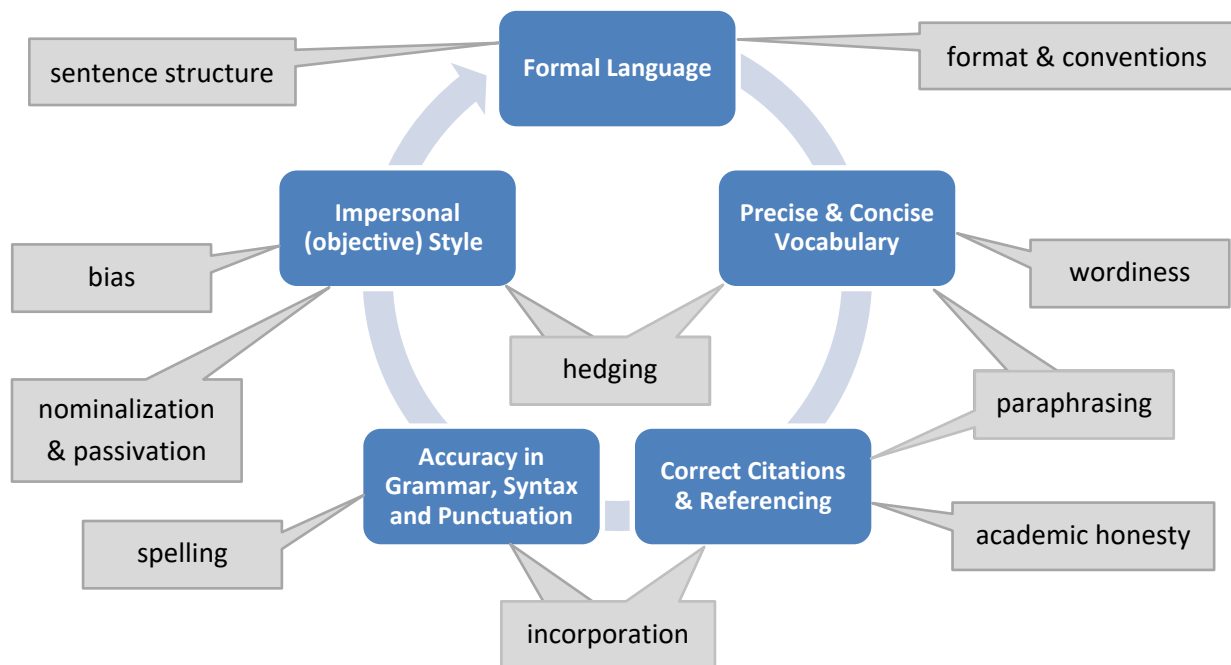
It is **imagined** because most members have never actually met. While a specific field or campus might have a real community, the standards established by various fields develop through members seeing only each other's writing.

It has **real expectations** because teachers and instructors will base a portion of your grade on how you adhere to the standards. These standards also become stricter when writers seek to publish.

## BASIC ADVICE

Many universities will draft their own style guide and include it in the curriculum of beginning writing courses or use well established university guidelines (such as Purdue's). Reviewing a few of these is an advisable strategy for beginning college students as finding one's own way through the divergent opinions on the finer points is what makes a stronger writer.

They generally revolve around the following five concepts, though some guides break them down into smaller groups to draw attention to certain problems such as wordiness or an overreliance on simple sentence structures, or to highlight the need for hedging and to avoid bias.



The Ivory Tower is a metaphor for the academic community because it is considered to be removed from everyday life and the typical speech of everyday language. It often negatively connotes 'privileged', 'lofty', or 'sheltered' and 'out of touch' from real concerns.

# AN OBJECTIVE STYLE THAT IS DEFINED SUBJECTIVELY



The idea of linguistic uniformity is deceptive, and most academics have not studied linguistics or language formally and thus some can be prone to feeling threatened by incorrect use as they see it AS a sign of inaccurate thinking and moral inferiority leading to the perception of them as guardians or police of long held standards rather than being sensitive to language varieties and change.

Different fields, schools and instructors may offer a range of advice and suggestions that might conflict with that of another, or students might find one instructor who thinks their language is too wordy or a term too biased while another may find them adequate. Preferences vary on the finer details of punctuation (is the oxford comma necessary?) or on basic formatting issues (are cover pages and double spacing necessary if the feedback is digital?), and there are certainly old notions that continue to pervade academia even though the logic behind them has been thoroughly destroyed (e.g. split infinitives and preposition ending sentences).

Just as language changes, new trends arise in formal writing and some may not survive to become standard.

The use of first person in academic writing has become more popular in recent years but many feel it will not last and still frown upon it. Regardless of what students prefer, the jury on the use of AI and multimedia has not come in even though digital formats have become widely acceptable. New lists of terms to replace older more biased terms arise every generation, but a few of these can engender resistance because they either misread the etymology (e.g. mankind), are reacting to misuse of the term (e.g. tribe), or are neologisms driven by [algospeak](#) (e.g. unalive) and may only have the lifespan of slang. Many terms are still acceptable in general conversation but frowned upon in writing; therefore, following the advice from instructors in their courses is advisable and for those who have doubts make note and investigate how others in the field feel in the spirit of academic inquiry.

More importantly, however, no matter how pedantic an instructor may seem, they should be considered as part of the audience that students are learning how to write to. While many students understand this, there are students that do not and demonstrate resistance to varying or alternative standards. While one instructor merely wants your thesis somewhere on the first page, another might penalize for it not being at the end of the introduction. While your last instructor might have provided online feedback, another might take advantage of free printing and need that double spacing to make line notes before finalizing feedback. Students who refuse to adjust from the standards they first learned or learned from an instructor who they perceive as having more authority are only demonstrating an inability to adapt, something that will likely create issues when one is employed or seeks to publish. Conversely, for the creatives who aspire to forging their own style, it is essential to remember that every successful writer who broke the rules had to had to master them first.



Linguistic prescriptivists *make terrible zoologists.*  
Starkey Comics



## EXAMPLE ANSWERS FOR EXERCISE ONE:

**Informal** - Reword “really good”, “very important”, “bad for our health”, “fantastic job”, and “and”.

**Subjectivity** – Reword or eliminate “I think” and “our health”.

**Wordiness** – Reduce “showing lots of results that prove it”.

**Lack of Hedging** – Modify “shows” and “prove it”.

**Spelling** – Replace “ultraprocessed” with “ultra-processed”.

ORIGINAL: I think the study was really good and very important, and it shows that eating ultraprocessed foods is bad for our health. The scientist who wrote the study did a fantastic job showing lots of results that prove it.

REVISION: The study is significant in that the author provided ample evidence to support their claim that eating ultra-processed foods is very likely to be unhealthy.

## HELPFUL LINKS:

**EAP Foundation:** <https://www.eapfoundation.com/writing/style/>

**Purdue Owl:** [https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general\\_writing/academic\\_writing/index.html](https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/academic_writing/index.html)

**San José State:** <https://www.sjsu.edu/writingcenter/docs/handouts/Academic%20Language.V2.pdf>

**Writing Commons:** <https://writingcommons.org/section/style/writing-styles/academic-writing-style-guide/>

## NOTES:

1. **Mankind:** The word *man* did not mean, and still does not exclusively mean *male* as it has come to mean today. In old and middle English, it meant person, and to state gender there was *wereman* (male person) and *wifman* (female person). The male version was shortened but applied to women as well, and *wifman* went through a number of phonological changes to become today’s women and woman, but *wif* meant female and only later came to mean *wife*. Since the *were* was dropped when referring to males, *man* has come to mean *male person*, *person*, and *humankind* in general. *Human*, *humankind*, and *humanity* (an ancient synonym developed in the Latin languages but visible in English’s *groom*) are acceptable alternatives and are preferred. However, since *man* is embedded in a multitude of phrases and writing (e.g. dogs are man’s best friend, teach a man to fish..., one man’s... is another man’s..., the man) where they do not refer to gender and are very unlikely to ever be reworded, there are those who understand the secondary sense and will resist censoring the word *mankind*. Note, though, that words such as *salesman*, *mailman*, or *fireman* do indeed cast an exclusive male connotation and should always be avoided.



2. **Tribe:** This word is a good example of how a term requires informed use rather than simply being banned as it can be used in multiple ways. As a metaphoric term (e.g. my yoga class is my tribe) it not only suggests racial appropriation but would not be appropriate for formal writing simply because it is metaphoric and hyperbolic. As political and social commentary it has a long history of negative connotations, implying primitive and savage from its long use as a contrast to “civilized western” nations. However, there is a significant difference in usage when describing a people as “tribal” and discussing the theory of [Dunbar’s Number](#) and whether there is a neurological basis for sizes of human organization. Anthropology has [moved on](#) from the term not entirely because of the historical negative connotations but mostly because a precise definition could not be achieved for analytical purposes. The term, though, is still widely used in some fields, such as history, and is formally used for indigenous groups in names and is a specific legal criterion of the Federal government when referring to Native Americans. Thus, *tribe* serves as a good example of words that requires caution rather than banishment; however, while *chiefdom* is probably the best alternative when attempting to categorize sizes of human organization the following synonyms might also suffice depending on the context: *kin-group*, *community*, *ethnic group*, *nation*, or *people*.
  
3. **Unalive:** It is debatable if this term is on the rise due to sensitivity since it is almost entirely driven by social media and the need to avoid censorship. Additionally, algorithms are developed by private companies to moderate private platforms, so they are not at all examples of free speech, nor is it prescribed speech but rather a form of constricted censorship handed down undemocratically. Additionally, the term can create ambiguity since it can be used to refer to suicide or homicide. Though the phrasing “they unalived themselves” is clearer, this more concise phrasing isn’t always used. One needs to also note that the terms *murder* and *suicide* are well embedded into numerous legal institutions and are unlikely to go away, but again neologisms have a remarkable tendency to both persist and overcome or to suffer rapid decline.

As a final note of comparison, the term *unhoused* arose roughly around the same time as *unalived* but appears to have a more optimistic future. First the term *homeless* does not have the historical currency or connotative power in English as *murder* or *kill*, and both the terms *unhoused* and *homeless* entered English around the same time (c. 1600s). *Home* also denotes a meaning other than house and can refer to one’s community or city. Though *unhoused* does reduce stigmatizing people, it suggests a particular political action by implying that the condition is due to structural issues within society rather than of an individual’s failing. It is important to remember that the United States has a particularly high number (compared to other cultures) of strong proponents who feel that an individual’s choices and failings are the root of all problems, so resistance to the term often stems from this belief. However, simply de-nominalizing the word *homeless* by using “people who are homeless” or “are suffering from homelessness” can be an adequate middle ground as well as *houseless*.

