

Academic Diction Mini-Lesson

Lesson Objective

The purpose of this lesson is to introduce students to the use of academic diction in their own writing.

List of Handouts

1. “What are the characteristics of Scholarly Diction?”
2. “Exercise 1”
3. “Exercise 2”

Length of Lesson

The lesson should take 20-30 minutes.

Variations for different disciplines

1. General mini-lesson
2. Education
3. Physical Anthropology
4. Speech

Source

1. Jessica Hammerman and Siobhan Cooke
2. Revised and modified by Siobhan Cooke

File name

ML_Academic Diction_GenA.doc

Lesson Instructions

1. Give students handouts including scholarly diction, and exercises keyed to their discipline.

2. Introduction (5 Min.). A sample script follows:

“Introduce the concept of different types of diction. It might be helpful to explain to the students that they use different ways of speaking to different audiences (friends, parents, teachers, boss, siblings etc.) and that the same occurs when writing. Asking the students about the different types of writing that they regularly engage in might help them to identify the contexts in which different types of prose are used.”

3. Refer to and discuss first handout on scholarly diction, which lists the attributes of good scholarly diction (5-10 Min.).

4. After the basics of academic diction have been introduced, have the students break up into groups of 4 (group size may depend on class size) and complete the diction exercises (10-15 Min.).

Diction refers to the kinds of words and expressions you choose to use in your communication. The choice is usually based on context, and we all have the ability to express what we mean using a different diction (colloquial, formal, intimate, etc.) depending on the situation and audience.

In scholarly (or academic or professional) diction, the goal is to convey information and ideas clearly and precisely using the vocabulary and basic concepts that are particular to your field. In scholarly writing you are writing for other scholars, people who, it can be assumed, share your professional training but not necessarily your cultural background or personal temperament.

Therefore, scholarly diction should:

—Be as precise as necessary. This may require a specialized vocabulary.

- “Most people” is vague; “a majority of American undergraduates” is more specific. “In society today” is not precise enough to be useful. What society? Where?
- Specialized terms such as “socioeconomic” or “stratification” can be usefully succinct.
- Sometimes you need broader terms to be accurate. For example, instead of “salary” you might use “compensation” if you want to include health benefits, bonuses, etc.

—Be as simple and clear as possible. Don’t use a word that “sounds good” if the meaning isn’t absolutely clear (to you and to your reader.) Use your dictionary.

- Don’t use “elevated” language (“thus”, “heretofore”, “indubitably”) for its own sake.
- Watch for phrases that muddy your style and may be unnecessary. “As such”, “generally speaking”, “of course”, or “more or less” are a few examples.

—Avoid colloquialisms (slang), clichés, and expressions or metaphors that might be common in ordinary speech but that add nothing to your meaning. It shouldn’t normally be necessary to use “you” or “I”.

- “Children” instead of “kids,” for example. “Alcohol” instead of “booze.”
- “When all is said and done”, “nowadays”, “all over the place”, etc. are inappropriate.

—Express your opinion, but not your prejudices. Make your point with facts and arguments, not with emotional appeals.

- For example, if you think SUV drivers are obnoxious, your paper about suburbanization is not the place to mention it.
- Avoid expressions of your personal reactions (“Wow!”, “Yuck”).
- “I believe...” is usually inappropriate: you are asserting theories, not beliefs.

—Never talk down to your reader. Don’t over-explain things that will be obvious to someone in your field, and don’t over-generalize.

- A statement like “Winter is the coldest season” is out of place in an academic paper, as is “New Yorkers hate Winter.”
- Your sentence structure and organization should also reflect the sophistication of your thought. Use a variety of complex and compound sentences.

—Most importantly, remember to take these as guidelines, not rigid rules, and use your own judgment about what works and what doesn’t.

Exercise 1.**Handout II**

On the left side of the chart below are some informal sentences, and on the right there are formal academic versions. Match the informal version with the formal version in the opposite column. Record your answers in the spaces provided.

Informal version	Academic version
1. "Scientists have proven that companies have lots of different job titles usually because it's a big company, etc., but also because the people there may just want it that way."	A. "In recent years, ... observers have shown increasing interest in how organizations and other institutions directly shape the distribution of wages and other career-related outcomes."
2. "Sometimes I wonder how some people became so rich."	B. "Wages are assigned to jobs more often than to individuals."
3. "In society today, corporate America is basically responsible for how much you get paid."	C. "In a large-scale study, Baron and Bielby (1986) found that proliferation of job titles in establishments was related not only to size, environmental complexity, and technology, but also to custom, political forces, and social relations inside and outside organizations."
4. "Say you're a great secretary, and your boss is a really clueless lawyer. He's still going to make more money than you."	D. "Social scientists from diverse disciplines have long been interested in understanding what produces inequalities in the distribution of income, status, and other rewards."

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

Exercise 2.

Handout III

Below are five informal sentences included in a student’s essay. Please rewrite them using more scholarly diction. Be sure to maintain the original meaning of the sentence. There is more than one correct way to rework these sentences.

Informal Version	Academic Version
1. “It’s not as bad as it used to be, and lots more women are working these days, but it’s still tough for girls if you want a good job.”	
2. “Most people are really mad about how bosses at big companies are paid sooooo much more than everyone else. I personally think it’s totally unfair and it makes everyone work a lot less.”	
3. “If you’re black or white, if you’re rich or poor, if you’re male or female, or if you’re from another country, you stick with your own kind.”	
4. “You can tell from the photo that this is a poor neighborhood.”	
5. “My paper is going to be based on trying to show how Flatbush is changing.”	
6. “I believe that drug use is a significant sociological issue.”	

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The writer of the paragraph below uses academic diction. Please isolate some examples of sentences that are particularly well constructed. Can you think of ways that this writer might have made these sentences less formal? What is particularly effective about the writer's style?

I believe that students do not come to class as blank slates and often bring with them preconceived notions about the field of psychology. These preconceived notions may consist of false assumptions, generalizations, and ideologies that manifest into a lack of appreciation and understanding for the science of psychology. As a teacher, a psychologist in-training, and a researcher, it is important for me to acknowledge that, but also to provide students with a well-informed view of psychology. However, before I can challenge them to think differently, I must first help my students see the relevance of psychological concepts in their lives. I bring psychology to life by providing examples students can grasp based on what they know of the world. I take big theories down to possible answers to every-day life questions (i.e., why have you chosen the friends you have? why do we conform to societal norms?) to make the connection between the textbook and real life issues. Demonstrations and activities are used to help students "see, feel, and touch" what psychology is all about.

Because they are not blank slates, I invite students to utilize their life experiences when learning the course material. I involve students in activities, ask for examples from their lives, and allow time for reflection and reactions to the material. For example, to illustrate concepts of gender differences, gender roles, and societal influences, I engage my students in the "Are men really from Mars and women from Venus?" dialogue. As students arrive to class that particular day, all the men are given blue-colored paper and the women given pink-colored paper. Members of each sex are asked to sit on separate sides of the room. I then ask them to write on their paper answers to questions such as, "Which is the better sex? Which sex has it easier? How did the 'color-coding' make you feel?" and to provide rationale for their responses. Written comments are shared and each sex gets to respond to the answers of the opposite sex. I then bring in knowledge from research to contextualize the discussion and demonstrate how psychologists scientifically explore answers to such questions. If I can help students see the relevance and the value in what they learn in class, the desire to learn and to be challenged would not be something forced upon them. Rather, as I have found through my teaching experiences, once students are engaged and excited about the material, they will begin to proactively ask questions, think critically, and search for connections and relevance on their own. All the while they gained a better understanding and appreciation for psychology as a scientific study.

Source: Szu-Hui Lee. <http://ftad.osu.edu/portfolio/philosophy/lee.html>

In the exercise below, please convert the informal sentence into more formal academic diction. There is no “right” answer as there are multiple ways of phrasing each sentence.

Informal

Academic

I want to be a teacher because I really want to help kids learn stuff.	<i>I want to be a teacher so that I may aid my students in acquiring good language skills.</i>
Math skills are important if you don't want a crummy job.	
I want to make sure all students get what I'm talking about.	
I'm gonna work hard to make sure kids of all backgrounds get a good education.	
It is totally unfair that some kids don't get to finish school. I want to change that.	
Nowadays, computer illiteracy is a giant problem if somebody wants to go to college, that's why I want to teach computer technology in high school.	

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<i>Informal</i>	<i>Academic</i>
I believe hominins walked on two feet.	<i>The fossil evidence suggests that early hominins were bipedal.</i>
Chimps have really big brains compared to other primates, that’s why they are smart and use tools and stuff.	
I’m not 100 percent on that fact, but that’s the vibe I get.	
<i>Paranthropus</i> had big teeth to crunch leaves with.	
One researcher even believes humans evolved in the water, LOL!	
Generally speaking, infanticide is thought to occur in more sexually dimorphic animals, however.	

- A. Compare the two versions of these sentences. What characteristics does the academic version have that the informal version lacks?

Informal version

“People who can only hear in one ear have trouble hearing because you need two ears to hear.”

“It’s too bad that we didn’t have more kids to experiment on, because as it is our results are basically useless.”

“We anticipate to conduct a questionnaire for informing purposes and to peak the interest of people on this issue.”

“The next time you talk to someone who seems slow, don’t say, ‘What’s his problem?’ because maybe he just didn’t hear you.”

Academic version

The listening problems experienced by individuals with unilateral hearing loss can be explained in part by the binaural phenomenon.

It is impossible to generalize the findings of this study to the larger population because the number of participants was limited.

Data will be collected through a questionnaire designed to engage participants’ interest in the issue.

A patient’s hearing loss can be a significant factor in misdiagnosis by mental health professionals.

B. Look at the sentences below. Explain in a few lines why each one would not be suitable for an academic essay.

C. Now try writing your own academic version.

1. “The difficult thing about the client was that she was really, really shy, so I could barely hear her.”
2. “When I started this paper I thought, I need to go to the library and read what the experts say about stuttering.”
3. “Due to what I observed at the examination, it is clear that a problem will be caused by the parents.”
4. “Since the beginning of time people have mumbled. Our study will focus closely on the question why do they do it?”
5. “My paper is going to be based on trying to show how drugs are the answer to this problem.”
6. “I believe that speech is an important part of many people’s lives.”