

8. Style

There are two types of problems related to style: one is the effect of personal writing habits, the second is the result of cultural differences between your mother tongue or your educational background on the one hand, and English for academic purposes on the other.

8.1 Modifiers

One of the most important aspects of language use is the appropriate use of modifiers. This is because it is in this way that you show your understanding of the value of the points you are making - in other words, you are showing your own real understanding of the issues.

Look at these statements:

- 1. The Internet has made life more convenient for everyone.*
- 2. Computers are the perfect tool for education.*
- 3. In some cases money may not increase our happiness all the time.*
- 4. Oil is the best source of energy but nuclear energy is much better.*
- 5. Traffic congestion is an absolute disaster in all cities.*
- 6. Alternative energy probably seems to be a possible answer to our future energy needs.*

Can you see how each one is inappropriate?

The most common errors in the use of modifiers are:

overgeneralisation
overemphasis or exaggeration
understatement
confusion

Modifiers should be used to make your writing accurate and thoughtful. They include **adjectives**, **adverbs**, **modal verbs**, **phrases** and other parts of speech showing degree, emphasis etc.

8.2 Overgeneralisation

As we saw in section 4.7, overgeneralisation is very common. To modify overgeneralised statements, it is generally necessary to reduce the **scope** of the statement, by limiting the **quantity** or **frequency** or **area** involved.

Here are just a few common modifiers for this:

<i>few</i>	<i>many</i>	<i>most</i>
<i>sometimes</i>	<i>often</i>	<i>frequently</i>
<i>generally</i>	<i>common</i>	<i>widespread</i>

8.3 Overemphasis

Here the problem is not to exaggerate the **intensity** of a statement. The writer's **attitude** should show a suitable **degree of certainty**.

Degrees of intensity are expressed by terms such as:

<i>rather</i>	<i>quite</i>	<i>significant</i>
<i>considerable</i>	<i>very</i>	<i>dramatic</i>

Degrees of certainty can be shown by expressions such as:

<i>maybe</i>	<i>perhaps</i>	<i>possible</i>
<i>definitely</i>	<i>undoubtedly</i>	<i>generally speaking</i>
<i>it is clear that</i>		

and all the modal verbs:

<i>may</i>	<i>might</i>	<i>can</i>
<i>could</i>	<i>should</i>	<i>would</i>
<i>must</i>	<i>ought to</i>	

You can also use expressions that distance yourself from the statement, such as:

<i>some people believe</i>	<i>it is generally agreed</i>
<i>according to most scientists</i>	<i>it is said that</i>

And in conclusions it is useful to modify your statements with these expressions:

<i>Therefore it seems that...</i>	<i>It can be concluded that</i>
<i>This indicates that</i>	

Certain verbs, for example, can also show varying degrees of strength or certainty:

<i>people are / tend to be</i>	<i>this suggests / indicates / proves</i>
<i>x causes y / x is a contributing factor to y</i>	

8.4 Understatement and Confusion

While overstatement and exaggeration are more common, some students go the other way, and understate their case, or produce mixed and confused signals. This usually occurs when students mix some of the modifiers inappropriately.

IT IS IMPORTANT TO BE VERY ACCURATE IN USING MODIFIERS.
Otherwise you can sound confused and unintelligent. Look at these examples:

It is clear that nuclear energy is likely to be a possible solution to our energy needs.

Several people have died of starvation because of the severe drought.

People depend significantly on the oceans for food.

Alternative energy probably seems to be the answer to our energy needs.

The major problem in modern cities might be air pollution.

TASK 23

Go back to the examples in 8.1 above, and those in 8.4, and modify them appropriately.

➡ Answer Key

TASK 24

Consider ways of increasing or reducing the strength of the following statements so that they become acceptable.

- a) *Television encourages violence.*
 - b) *Overpopulation will possibly cause many problems in the future.*
 - c) *Our environment is being totally destroyed.*
 - d) *People are only interested in money these days.*
 - e) *Maybe the continuing destruction of the rainforest will increase the greenhouse effect.*
 - f) *Students who go to study abroad could perhaps find that they may have some unexpected experiences.*
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8.5 Waffle

Lack of ideas is likely to result in a badly written essay. What commonly happens is that the writer either needs to fill up the paper with **empty, meaningless expressions** (often referred to as **waffle**), or there is a good deal of **repetition** of the same idea, or both. Here is an example of such a piece of writing:

Usually people in the world have their own habits of eating and each and every culture has its own customs about food. However, because of a new international, world-wide communication system, people can have contact with each other and so many people are learning about other people's customs and habits about food. Generally speaking, some people are becoming accustomed to food from other places as they get in touch with other cultures.

TASK 25

Write down the ideas expressed in the above paragraph in one short sentence.

8.6 Formulaic and Thoughtless Writing

Many students appear to learn a basic structure and a few basic expressions and then attempt to apply these to every essay, no matter what the topic or the meaning. This can produce some strange results. Look at the following examples of mindless writing:

Nowadays sports are likely to be common throughout the world.

Education has become an important thing in the last few decades.

A student who writes like this is not showing much intelligence! There are also connectors which are used without thought, or overused. The series:

Firstly... Secondly... Thirdly... Finally... In conclusion

at the beginning of consecutive paragraphs reflects a lazy mind, writing to a formula.

Then there are **clichés**, which are more commonly misused by native speakers of English, but some learners also think that they are writing good, idiomatic English by using them. Clichés are expressions which have been overused in the language, and are generally a sign of lazy thinking.

Examples include

*each and every one, food for thought, at the end of the day,
last but not least, without a doubt, as we know*

It is better to avoid such expressions.

Another word which irritates many English teachers (and examination markers) is **nowadays**. It is seriously overused and is not at all necessary. It is very easy to simply leave it out in most cases:

(Nowadays) The Internet is widely used for educational purposes.

8.7 Immature Writing

Lack of vocabulary and limited knowledge of grammar are other causes of bad writing style.

Many students have excellent ideas but do not have sufficient vocabulary in English to express them. In such cases, some students simply use vocabulary incorrectly, and become incomprehensible, but more commonly students in this situation are likely to write in a much simpler style than is suitable for English for **academic** purposes. It is better to write simple, correct English than to try to write sophisticated English and do it badly, but of course a university or college entry test essay should not sound as if it was written by someone in primary school! The style you should aim for should be at least that of a good year 9 or year 10 student writing in their mother tongue.

Consider the following example:

Many people are worried about the environment. And they think we should do something to make it better. For example, instead of using fossil fuels we can use the sun's heat to make electricity. Or we can use the wind to make electricity. And we can also use water to make electricity.

There are no mistakes in the grammar of the above example, but it is clearly not the way a university student would be expected to write!

TASK 26

Rewrite the above example into one or two sentences, using more sophisticated vocabulary and sentence structures.

8.8 Cultural Differences in Style

One of the major problems that some students face is that their previous experience in writing has been in a style which is not similar to that expected in their test essays. This may be because

- a) the type of writing they have done before is different, or
- b) the style of writing valued by the mother tongue culture differs from the style expected in English.

Different Types of Writing

An essay is not like a letter, or a debate or political speech, or a text-book. You need to be aware of the differences in style that each requires.

TASK 27

Consider the following statements and decide which are suitable in style for an essay:

- a) *Dear lecturer, I want to tell you my views on the problems with the environment.*
- b) *You might think there's no problem in having your kids watch TV for a few hours each day, but look out! They could be watching rubbish!*
- c) *The air we depend on consists of oxygen, nitrogen, carbon dioxide and other gases.*
- d) *Is television a curse or a blessing? Should we value it or banish it from our homes? The answer is not easy to determine!*

- e) *If we allow the air to continue to be polluted by car and factory emissions, we are likely to find more and more of the population suffering from ill health.*
- f) *There are television programs which are clearly unsuitable for children to watch and it is important to ensure that young people are protected from them.*

☛ *Answer Key*

More difficult to deal with are the **differences between writing styles in different cultures**. From my experience it seems to me, for example, that Japanese students value short, simple sentences, often beginning with *And*, *But* or *So*. Iranians, on the other hand, seem to have a tradition of valuing quite complex sentence structures, with very long subjects. The following is an adaptation of an Iranian student's writing:

Encouraging and providing suitable conditions for public transport by the use of public vehicles instead of private vehicles is another way of solving the problem.

In Asian languages such as Chinese, Korean and Thai it is also often preferable to have the main idea expressed in noun phrases at the beginning of a sentence, rather like in the above example. Unfortunately, this not only sounds awkward in English, but it is also extremely difficult to write such complex sentences in **correct** English. The original sentence was, in fact, full of grammatical errors. The way to avoid this is to turn the sentence back to front:

Another way of solving the problem is to encourage and provide suitable conditions for the use of public vehicles instead of private ones.

It is not possible to give one kind of advice about style to all students. Many textbooks on essay writing for native speakers encourage students to make their sentences less complex. This is because there is a tendency for typical English-speaking school-leavers to try to put too much into one sentence. However, if you are not a native speaker this advice may not be appropriate for you unless you too are trying to put too much into one sentence.

Repetition of words and phrases is another issue to consider. While in some languages repetition is used a great deal and quite acceptably, (such as Indonesian, for example), in English repetition is not highly valued, and writers make great efforts to avoid it.