STYLE: WORD-LEVEL

Academic style is a high-formal form. Academic style is a form of language that exists in the register just above "everyday talk." The technical name for this type of writing/speaking is Standard American Edited English. The purpose of academic style is to convey messages to a broad range of English speakers internationally and within academic and professional areas.

In order to refine your writing practices and to create familiarity with academic style, I have provided a few key characteristics found in most academic writing. Please practice awareness of these nuances in your writing for the rest of the semester.

Note: Academic forms and styles are not absolute, but they can help you to "enter the academic conversation." Remember: Always be yourself, but know when to adjust your language to meet the audience's needs and requirements.

The following style guidelines originate from the official American Psychological Association documentation style, Standard Edited American English (or SEAE), and various contemporary academic writing practices (as cited in common works such as Strunk & White's Elements of Style and the standards put forth by the United States Plain Language Act of 2010).

USE WORDS THE READER WILL UNDERSTAND.
The average English speaker knows 20,000-35,000 words. With over the a million words in the English language, using unfamiliar words actually happens much more than you think.

BE BRIEF WITH WRITING.
Do not use more words than you need. The best writing is often defined by a few traits. The first trait is brevity or conciseness (saying more with less).

Other traits include creativity (which loosely translates to being original with your work and your topic matter), consistency (using standard formatting and practices to make your work understood universally), and finally (and most importantly), clarity (making sure your message is clear and easily understood).

USE MORE SPECIFIC WORDS.
Understanding English has more to do with the words we chose than how long our sentences are. Consider the phrase, a lot. What does "a lot" mean? Also, does this construction sound very sophisticated? No. Instead of "a lot," try several or many. In fact, if you can provide a real quantity, you are already being much more specific than before.

Example: She has a lot of cars. -versus-
Revised: She has several/many cars. -versus- She has five cars.

USE ANTECEDENTS.
Pronouns are the source of more misunderstandings than any other words in the English language.

The worst offenders are demonstrative pronouns. Demonstrative pronouns are pronouns which take the place of a person, place, or concept in an attempt to maintain some specificity.

Unfortunately, these structures can be very vague, as well as extremely boring. When such structures are stacked on top of each other, these demonstrative pronouns can also create intense monotony (or undesirable repetition).

The most common offenders are: It, This, That, These, Those
Example: It is weird to see such things everyday. (contains a demonstrative pronoun)
Revised: Mismatched makeup is weird to see everyday. (contains a definite subject)

EXCEPTIONS TO DEMONSTRATIVE PRONOUNS ARE DETERMINERS:
When using the words this, that, these, and those, you can improve the quality of the sentence by putting the noun in front of this word, which changes the demonstrative pronoun into a determiner (a word that helps a noun to show specificity).

Example: This is a really bad vehicle. (contains a demonstrative pronoun)
Revised: This truck is a really bad vehicle. (contains a determiner and noun)
Revised: That truck is a really bad vehicle. (contains a determiner and noun)

LIMIT PRONOUNS - THEY ARE AMBIGUOUS.
 Ambiguous means unclear. Generally, pronouns make things unclear. Therefore, as a rule of thumb, be very selective when using pronouns in academic and professional writing. Generally, you should always use the antecedent rather than a pronoun, even at the expense of sounding repetitive.

Example: Mike took Jim to see the football game. He really liked the game. (Not Clear) (Even though we might assume that "Jim" likes the game, we cannot be absolutely positive).

Therefore, use the antecedent (the original noun) for the sake of clarity (even at the expense of seeming repetitious).
Revised: Mike took Jim to see the football game. Jim really liked the game. (Clear)

SPELL OUT CONTRACTIONS.
While contractions are perfectly acceptable in informal writing, some narratives, and even creative writing, Contractions are usually considered informal constructions in formal forms writing (e.g., academic exposition, academic argumentation, scientific, technical, and legal writing). Thus, their use is limited in formal situations. Aside from their informal use, particular contractions can cause confusion.

Example: It's
Revised: It is (as in: It's raining)
Revised: It has (as in: It's been a while since we've talked....)

If you want to be clear, then replacing contractions with the original full words and/or phrases is a good practice. Likewise, to maintain formality, do not use contractions.

USE SPECIFIC NOUNS.
One of the ways to make the reader "see" the image in their mind is to use specific nouns and vivid details, which help to create depth in writing.

Example: My first kiss happened under a tree.

This sentence is okay, but the noun, Tree, is very plain and does nothing for the audience. In order to engage the audience, the writer must work to make the noun more specific.

What if we tried something different.... Consider these substitutes:
Pine Tree = much more engaging and even extends to the sense of smell
Palm Tree = changes the setting of the scene (makes things seem more arid or coastal, less green and lush)
Cactus = again creates a sense of aridity but also makes the scene more comical and even potentially perilous/dangerous
Redwood Tree = changes the sense of size in relation to the character or subjects
Sycamore Tree = adds a connection to "Romeo & Juliet" through literary connection/allusion

Thus,
Revised: My first kiss happened beside a cactus.
Revised: My first kiss happened under a palm tree.

USE STRONG VERBS.
Using strong and precise verbs can help the reader to better understand the action and to see the context of the action.
Example:
I got a gift. (Worse)
I bought a gift. (Better)
I purchased a gift. (Better)
I received a gift. (Better)
I accepted a gift. (Better)
I acquired a gift. (Better)
I found a gift. (Better)
I stole a gift. (Better)

Notice how the word "got" seems too general. Additionally, the word "got" does not provide a solid context for the reader. Notice how the suggestions below the example

provide better contexts for understanding the action/the act. In fact, they provide much more specific contexts in relation to the subject and direct object.

One of the most significant situations for using strong and precise is delivering reporting verbs inside of signal phrases.

Example:
Dr. Tenison says "Why do people seek children in the midst of complex relationships?" (Worse)
Rather than simply providing the reader with a general reporting verb such as "Says" or "States," the writer could use other words such as:

Revised:
Dr. Tenison asks "Why do people seek children in the midst of complex relationships?" (Better)
Dr. Tenison posits the question: "Why do people seek children in the midst of complex relationships?" (Better)
Dr. Tenison considers: "Why do people seek children in the midst of complex relationships?" (Better)
Again, notice how the word "Says" can be replaced with significantly better choices, which provide the audience with much more specific contexts for the quoted/paraphrased information.