

Avoid lazy writing in your academic essays

Lazy writing within your academic essays does not mean that you are lazy. It means that you're taking short cuts in your writing as opposed to taking the time necessary to provide the necessary detail, or that you're relying on expressions which are easy to write, but inappropriate for academic assessment and thus, additional time is needed to come up with more appropriate language. Lazy writing can also involve over relying on personal experiences to discuss an issue within your essay, and forgetting to engage with the literature – hence, support – more. By avoiding these weaknesses, your reader can better follow your points, and you will come across as a mature and critical writer. Combined, if you address the three weaknesses outlined below, then your writing will indeed be more critical. Let's now look at these common weaknesses in students' writing one by one, those that indeed reflect 'lazy' writing.

1. Using empty expressions

Empty expressions are the kind that don't really forward or support a point/argument, and can come across as rather informal at times, and thus sound like casual speech and not an academic essay. As such, this is an example of lazy writing because it's all too easy to use such expressions, but it takes more time to stop and consider what might work better. For example:

***Everyone knows** that climate change is the single most critical issue facing the planet.*

***Many researchers** have argued that education in Britain is not based on meritocracy.*

***It has been suggested/argued/discussed** that when a language dies, a culture dies with it.*

'Everyone knows' is fine for everyday, casual conversation with friends. But not for an academic essay, or academic assessment in general. It's also too informal an expression, but more than this, is it *really* true that 'everyone knows' whatever it is that you're claiming they know? Unlikely. Don't forget – the claims you make in your academic assessments will be taken at face value, taken literally. Thus, there is no room to make overly assertive statements (please see point two below), and statements which don't really say much. This is the case with the three sentences above, and the bolded sections within.

Having said that, if you follow such statements with actual evidence, then the problem is solved (but the first sentence above also needs to change the expression 'everyone knows', as this alone is problematic no matter what evidence you follow the claim with):

***Most of the population is aware** that climate change is a critical issue facing the planet.*

Costello (2019), for example, discusses awareness of this issue in several countries, and how the populations there are working to address climate change.

Many researchers have argued that education in Britain is not based on meritocracy (Johnson, 2012; Mangione, 2016; Davis, 2019).

It has been suggested/argued/discussed that when a language dies, a culture dies with it. Ellerton (2021) provides clear evidence of this, charting the death of several Amazonian languages and the fact that once the last speaker dies, so does the language and in turn, awareness of the culture for future generations.

As you can see, if indeed you follow some of these expressions with evidence – largely seen with references to the relevant studies/literature – then the expressions become valid. But using such expressions without any real indication that you’ve done some reading around the subject, leads to a lack of credibility for your claims/statements and also for you as a writer.

2. Using hyperbolic and emotional language

Hyperbolic language refers to overly assertive language, exaggeration and essentially, over the top expressions (and is seen in the sentence above with the expression *everyone knows*). Now, this kind of language does indeed have a time and place. We use such language on a regular basis perhaps, such as *I’d give my right arm to travel the world*. No, you wouldn’t. But the point has been made well and by way of a more creative, even fun, style of language. The point is that you really want to travel the world. But such a style does not create the required academic tone, one that involves a bit more restriction. Likewise, using emotional language lends itself to hyperbole. Combined, this kind of language is lazy in the context of academic writing because it can sometimes reflect the kinds of language that immediately come to mind, perhaps based on everyday use. But it takes more time and consideration to instead stop, consider and rethink your word choices and in doing so, produce a more academic tone. Have a look at the two examples below:

*Without doubt, the research study is fully credible, and this kind of methodological design has **never** been seen before.*

*The research of Gray (2010) shows the **traumatic, devastating and depressing** reality for many children in the world today.*

Now, it’s perfectly fine to believe the more assertive and/or emotional content within the sentences above, and you probably have good reason to if this were your actual essay. But once again, academic writing requires a certain emotional restraint, so it’s best to play your cards close to your chest, even more so when you’re conducting your own research. Just as there are many ways to be hyperbolic and overly emotional in your writing, there are also many ways to address such issues. The examples below are therefore just two examples, amongst many others, that can make the two examples above better. Notably, this is done by **hedging** – the practice of using more cautious language as the opposite of hyperbole – and

using just one emotional word as opposed to three. Hence, in both examples below less really is more.

*Arguably, the research study is fully credible, and this kind of methodological design **might** be thus duplicated for further studies.*

*The research of Gray (2010) shows the **traumatic** reality for many children in the world today.*

As you can see, using words like ‘arguably’ and ‘might’ creates a more cautious tone, which translates into a more critical writer and subsequently, more critical writing. And the use of the word ‘traumatic’ is fine, as, while this is indeed an emotional word, it’s just one word, and not three emotional words in a row which would otherwise function to shout at the reader. And if your writing comes across as being too emotional, it can indicate bias, which is never good for assessment.

3. Relying too much on personal experience

Whether or not you can include personal experience within your essays will depend in large part on the discipline you’re writing for. The Hard Sciences, for example, are less concerned about the personal side of things precisely because they largely deal with predictable, unchanging natural phenomena, and so personal experience might not even be relevant. The Social Sciences and Humanities, however, are respectively focused on society/people, and personal interpretation of, say, music, art or film. As such, the personal side of things is perhaps more relevant for such disciplines, and subjects within.

So, if you’re writing, for example, an essay focused on teaching practice or about your cultural background, then personal experience as a teacher can add depth and in fact functions as *professional* experience too. Likewise, if you’re from Italy and you’re writing an essay about Italian societal structure, then your knowledge as a cultural insider could be valuable indeed.

But if too much of your essay is made up of paragraph after paragraph of discussing your personal experiences/knowledge/insights, this can lead to three problems, including the two just discussed: the use of empty expressions; hyperbolic/emotional language; and neglecting to refer to the relevant literature with which to back up/support your points. This is lazy writing because you’re relying too much on personal knowledge simply because it’s close to hand, instead of taking the time needed to bring in the relevant literature also. And by including literature, you’re also situating your personal knowledge and experience within previous academic studies, again demonstrating critical writing. Consider the following example, which illustrates the three issues all in one place:

Teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) requires empathy for the students. This is something I have as I am a non-native speaker of English and thus, can

appreciate the struggles that **every** EFL students has. These struggles include a fear of making mistakes with grammar and pronunciation; fear of failing tests; and fear of looking **stupid** in front of their peers as a result. This indeed affects **all** EFL students and this is why it is **absolutely** vital that EFL teachers create ways to **destroy** student fear and create a more nurturing environment instead.

Imagine that the next few paragraphs that follow the one above have the same kind of content: empty expressions, hyperbole, and not a single reference in sight. As a result, you're creating a lot of content for your essay which is clearly uncritical. But consider the revised paragraph below and how this would sound instead, with similarly constructed paragraphs to follow:

Teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) requires empathy for the students (**Thomas, 2000**). This is something I have as I am a non-native speaker of English and thus, can appreciate the struggles that **many** EFL students have. These struggles include a fear of making mistakes with grammar and pronunciation; fear of failing tests; and fear of looking **foolish** in front of their peers as a result (**Jones, 2005; Nielson, 2009; Denton, 2018**). This indeed affects **many** EFL students and this is why it is vital that EFL teachers create ways to **address** student fear and create a more nurturing environment instead.

You can hopefully appreciate the difference, made possible precisely by addressing the three points which have been made clear: avoidance of empty expressions, often made empty simply because there is no clarification to follow (e.g., a reference to the literature); avoidance of hyperbolic language; and inclusion of literature for the claims and assertions made, which acts as support for said claims.