

# Better writing: Extending vocabulary

The most important thing you can do in academic writing is to write clearly, without confusing or muddling ideas. **You should never try to make your writing look more academic by using ‘clever’ words for their own sake.** Nevertheless, it is good practice (as long as you do not sacrifice clarity) to use a wide variety of general vocabulary in academic writing. This sheet aims to show you a range of alternative words to express ideas that often occur in assignments.

Please note that although the words grouped together have very similar meanings, they are not necessarily completely interchangeable.

## Expressing certainty – saying that something is obvious or definite

**Adjectives:**            certain                            clear                            obvious                            undeniable

*It is clear that...*

*The obvious conclusion is...*

*The idea that...is undeniable.*

**Adverbs:**            certainly                            clearly                            obviously                            undeniably  
                          definitely                            patently                            undoubtedly                            unequivocally  
                          unquestionably                            incontrovertibly

*It is definitely not the case that...*

*Smith states unequivocally that...*

*These anomalies are undoubtedly due to...*

*Whilst it is incontrovertibly false to say that...*

**Note:** although the adjective **sure** can mean ‘completely certain’ the adverb **surely** is usually used (in academic writing) when you mean ‘I believe...’ or ‘Everybody knows...’

e.g. *It is surely true to say that...* means something like ‘I really do think it is true that...’

## Expressing doubt – saying that something may (or may not) be the case

<b>Adjectives:</b>	possible doubtful	(im)probable conceivable	(im)plausible uncertain	(un)likely debatable
--------------------	----------------------	-----------------------------	----------------------------	-------------------------

*One possible reason is...  
Whether...is debatable.*

*Though plausible, this theory is...  
It is quite conceivable that...*

<b>Adverbs:</b>	possibly arguably	probably maybe	plausibly perhaps	conceivably doubtfully
-----------------	----------------------	-------------------	----------------------	---------------------------

*It is probably true to say that...  
These are, perhaps, valid points...*

*It is arguably the case that...*

Remember that the modal verbs **can** and **may** are also widely used to express doubt, especially in their 'past simple' forms **could** and **might**.

*It could be the case that...*

*This might be true in some circumstances.*

## Using evidence – saying that something (e.g. a graph) tells us something

<b>Verbs:</b>	demonstrate reveal	show suggest	indicate imply	prove signify
---------------	-----------------------	-----------------	-------------------	------------------

*Figure 1 shows that...  
These findings prove that...*

*...as indicated in Table 3.1.  
As these results reveal, ...*

Take care using the verb **prove**! You must be sure that the evidence you are using really does prove (make absolutely certain) what you are claiming. It is often safer to use 'softer' terms such as **show** and especially **suggest**.

<b>Phrases:</b>	<i>According to Figure 5, there are... As can be seen from Table 1.7, it is...</i>	<i>It can be seen from Plate 3 that... From this it can be <u>inferred</u> that...</i>
-----------------	--	--

(Note that infer is usually used in the passive form)

**Note:** two further phrases that are often seen in writing are 'Figure 5 tells us that...' and 'We can see from Figure 5 that...' Although these phrases are sometimes seen in academic writing, it is best to avoid using the 'first person' (**us**, **we**) if you can.

## Expressing primacy – saying something is first or most important

**Adjectives:** first                      initial                      primary                      main  
principal                      chief                      key                      prime

*The primary issue is the...  
...is the chief idea challenged here.*

*The principal application of this theory is to...  
Of prime importance in this field is...*

**Adverbs:** firstly                      initially                      primarily                      mainly  
principally                      chiefly

*This essay looks firstly at...  
Practitioners are principally concerned with...*

*Researchers initially focused on...*

## Expressing sequence – saying something is second or next

**Adverbs:** secondly                      additionally (in addition)                      furthermore  
besides                      subsequently                      next

*In addition, it is important to...  
Besides this problem is the issue of...*

*Furthermore, the process must...  
Researchers subsequently turned to...*

**Determiner:** another e.g. *Another key point is that...*

## Expressing finality – saying something is last or in conclusion

**Adverbs:** lastly                      finally                      overall                      altogether  
ultimately

*Finally, this report examines...  
Altogether, the problem is not...*

*There are, overall, three key issues that...  
Ultimately, it might be said that...*

**Phrases:** *In conclusion, it could be said that...  
In summary, the three...*                      *There are, therefore...  
On the whole, then, there are...*