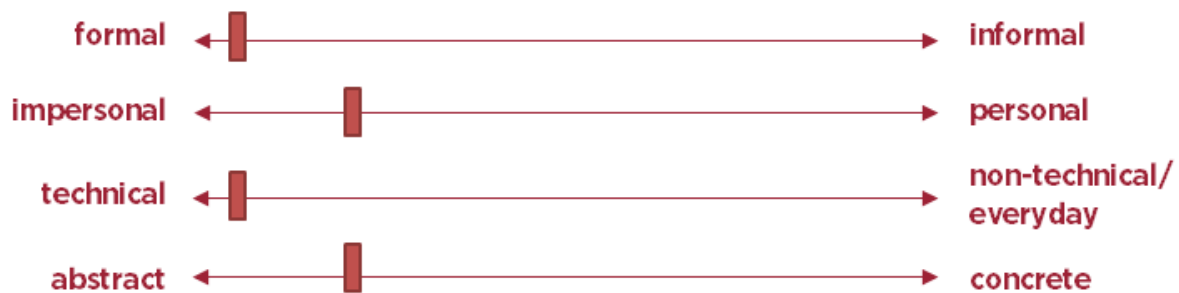# Case study tone

As with other reports, case studies are formal pieces of academic (or professional) writing. They should be formal, impersonal, technical, and abstract.

However, because a case study often has practical outcomes in terms of actions that might be taken in that particular situation, certain sections may use more concrete language (see below). Also, if the report is about your experience in a workplace or professional placement, it will be more personal, but it should still remain formal, technical, and reasonably abstract (see below).

Formal

Being formal doesn't necessarily mean being complicated or hard to read, but you do need to take care with your word choice and expression. Because a case study report is often written with a professional audience in mind (even in an academic setting), you need to make it sound professional. Imagine you are a professional writing for a business manager, your placement supervisor, or another professional.

To make your language sound as formal as possible, you should avoid using language features that are characteristic of spoken casual conversation, such as:

→ colloquial or slang words (e.g. use 'children' instead of 'kids');
→ contractions (e.g. use 'is not' instead of 'isn't');
→ abbreviations (e.g. use the word 'maximum' instead of 'max');
→ spoken-like grammatical structures such as run-on sentences or sentence fragments

Impersonal

Sometimes you, as the researcher, are also part of the situation that you are researching, e.g. in a workplace situation or professional placement. That means you may have to refer to yourself in your report. You should still do this in a formal way, keeping the report factual by describing what you did or said rather than how you felt (unless you're specifically asked to include a reflective component).

Technical

One of the purposes of a case study is to apply theory to a practical situation, so you need to show that you know how to use the relevant technical terms to discuss the theoretical issues of the case.

Tips for learning to use the technical terms of your discipline:

→ When you read your course readings, highlight terms that are not familiar to you. Do they seem to be specific to the discipline? Or are they just new words for you? You can check this by reading other sources in the same discipline, using the Library Search Box, or asking your tutor or fellow students.
→ Note down key terms from your lectures and tutorials.
→ Keep a glossary of the new terms you are learning.
→ Take note of how scholars in your discipline use the terms, e.g. do they define the term for the reader or do they assume the reader knows what it means? Do they format it in a special way, e.g. using a capital letter(s) or an acronym? Do they contrast the term with other terms that have a similar meaning to clarify its scope?

Abstract

Your case study report is about a real-world situation or problem, so you will use some concrete terms to refer to the people involved and what they do. This is especially the case if you are describing an individual's behaviour or health situation. In the Nursing example in the Case Study Purpose PDF (68 kB), you would have to refer to concrete things like Brian's eye, eye drops, etc.

However, your discipline has developed technical ways of discussing these things so that everyone can be more precise and be sure they're talking about the same thing. So you do need to use those technical and abstract terms as well. For example, in discussing the conditions of Brian's eye in the Nursing example, you would use the more technical and abstract term 'discharge' rather than 'sticky stuff', and 'administered to both eyes' instead of 'dropped in' or 'put in'. If you have to give recommendations, that's where it might get a bit more concrete as you apply your analysis to suggest future actions.

The nouns you use should mostly be abstract nouns: qualities and concepts, things that you can't see or touch, e.g. sustainability, economic growth, pollution, anxiety, design. Many of these are related to verbs (e.g. growth comes from the verb 'grow', 'pollution' comes from the verb 'pollute'). You can find out more in YourDictionary's article on Abstract Nouns.