



Choosing the right language for your purpose

Every piece of writing has a purpose. You need to choose the right language features to reflect that purpose, sentence by sentence, paragraph by paragraph, and section by section.

Language choices for academic writing

When you are explaining something complex, such as why people get sick, would you use the same type of language no matter what?

Think about how you might explain to a child why people get sick. Now imagine how it would sound if you said the same thing to a fellow student, or to your lecturer. You would most likely make very different choices in the different contexts.

Here are three examples from different types of texts that show different language choices. What differences do you notice?

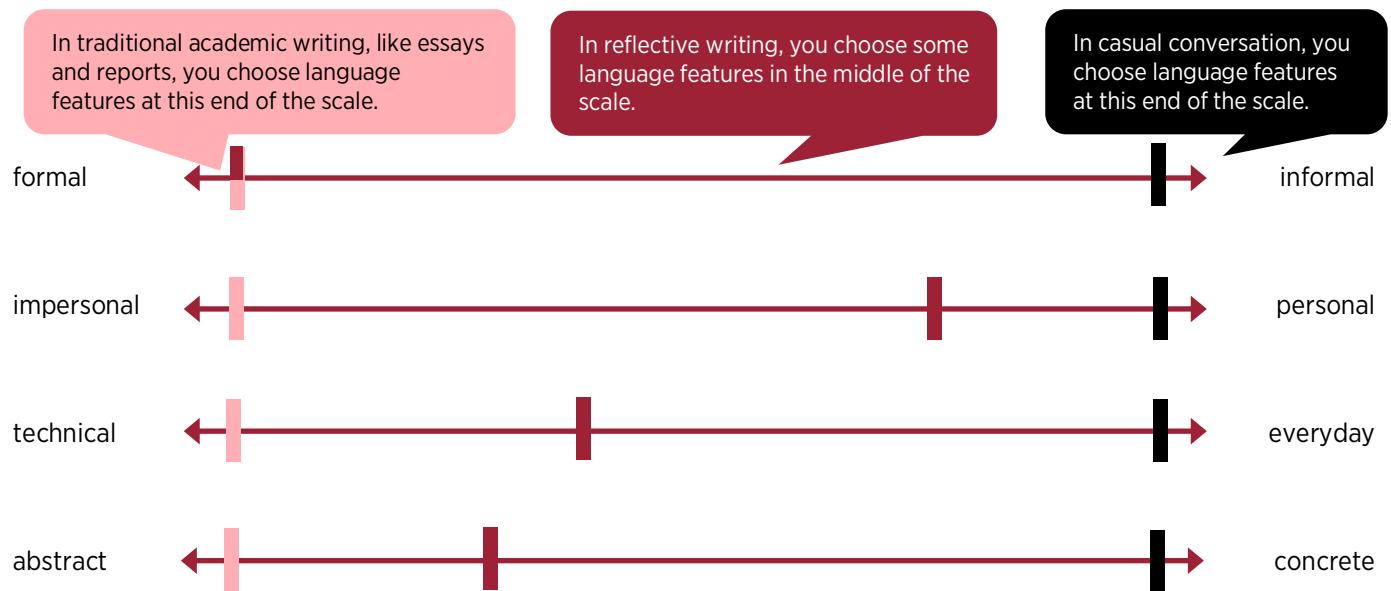
Essays, reports, etc	Reflective writing	Casual conversation
A unique feature of Australian plant species is that over seventy per cent are resistant to fire, and many need fire to germinate. Native grasses sprout green and cycads fruit after a fire (Gammage, 2011, p. 278). Various Australian native animals also, rely on fire to provide food sources at the appropriate time. Gammage (2011) argues that the abundance of plants and animals in 1788 shows that Aboriginal land management practices, through the skilful use of fire, clearly had a significant complexity that must be recognised (pp. 280-281).	The spotlight effect and the illusion of transparency is common in every individual's daily life. For example, I once fell between the platforms on stage as I was getting prepped to perform a piece. It was dark and another act was on so the audience's attention was focused elsewhere, but I was embarrassed and ended up feeling nervous. When I asked others afterwards, nobody had noticed my nervousness at all. From learning about these two concepts I have realised that being overly self-conscious is simply a waste of time. Those around you rarely pay attention to the minor things that you think are overwhelmingly obvious. (Student example)	The NRMA guy called, he was really lost. I was on the phone to him for like about 10 minutes before you found him. Think they need to update their map of the uni. Yeah, things've changed cos of the student hub etcetera. I'm like 'you need to go back round to the main entrance and come in the other entrance' and he's like 'errrr'. Poor guy. It's confusing.

Tone (or register)

In general, you can think of the tone of a piece of academic writing in terms of four features:

- formality,
- impersonality (or objectivity),
- technicality, and
- abstractness.

You could imagine the features of tone as sliding scales.



Some of the differences you saw in the text examples above are explained in the table below:

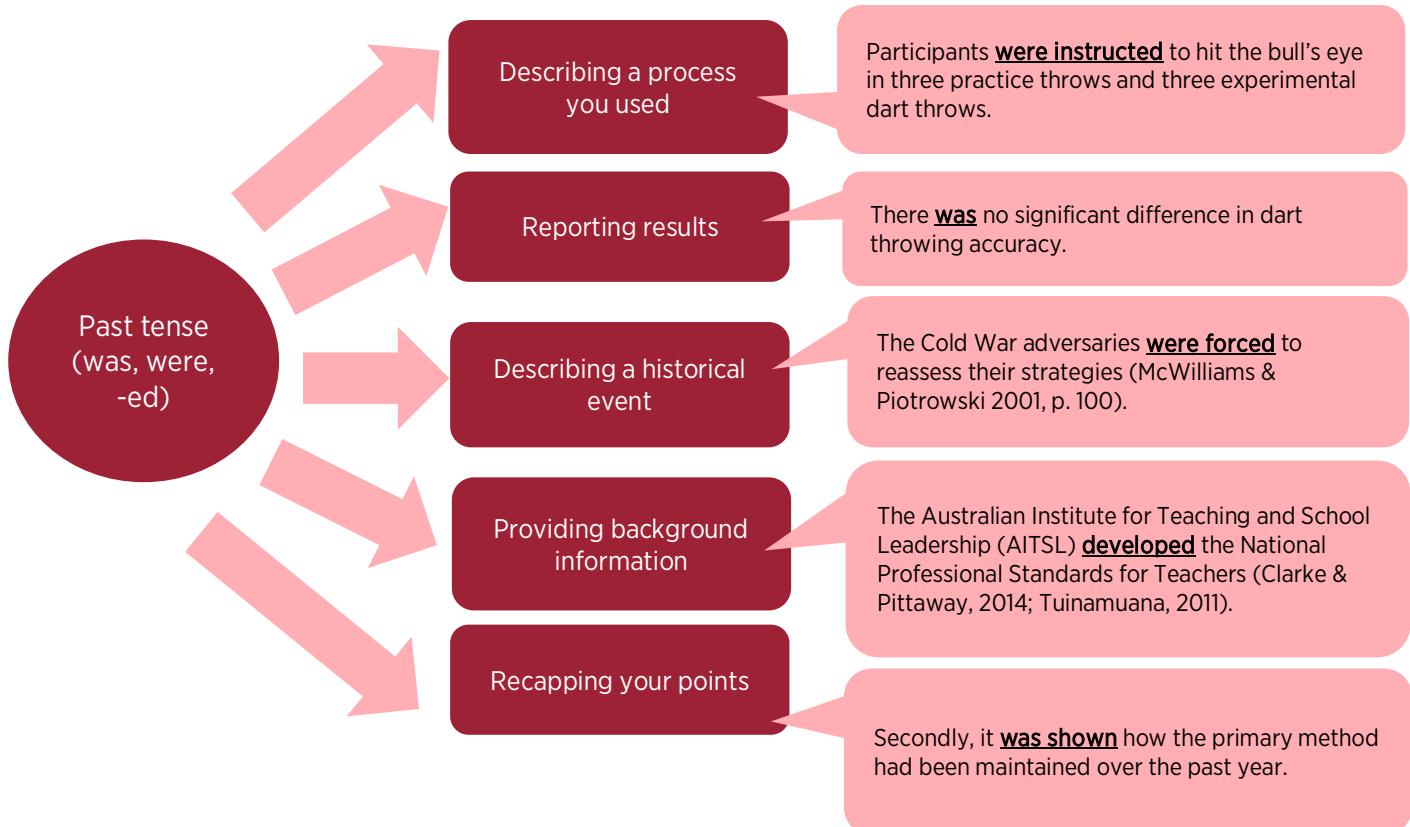
More appropriate for traditional academic writing	Less appropriate for traditional academic writing
Formal	Informal
→ ideas expressed in full sentences arranged in paragraphs → full forms of words (e.g. 'is not' instead of 'isn't'; 'maximum' instead of 'max.') → acronyms or initials explained in full the first time, e.g. 'New South Wales (NSW)'	→ dot points or incomplete sentences → spoken-like grammatical structures such as run-on sentences or sentence fragments → colloquial or slang words (e.g. 'kids' instead of 'children') → contractions (e.g. 'isn't' instead of 'is not') → abbreviations (e.g. 'max' instead of 'maximum')
Impersonal	Personal
→ focus on the claims and ideas you're presenting → occasionally use passive voice to avoid referring to yourself as the doer, e.g. 'participants were selected...' instead of 'I/we selected the participants'	→ personal pronouns like 'I', 'we', 'you'. These are appropriate in reflective writing. → focus on what you think and feel or what you did
Technical	Everyday
→ technical terms from your area of study → theoretical concepts → in-text citations using a particular referencing style	→ words that people outside of your area of study would easily understand
Abstract	Concrete
→ concepts and ideas → more nouns (e.g. competition, measurement, investigation)	→ things and experiences → more verbs (e.g. compete, measure, investigate)

Purpose

Different texts have different purposes, and different parts of the same text can have different purposes. You need to make language choices to match the purpose. One choice is the verb tense. Different tenses are used for **recounting**, **describing**, and **predicting**.

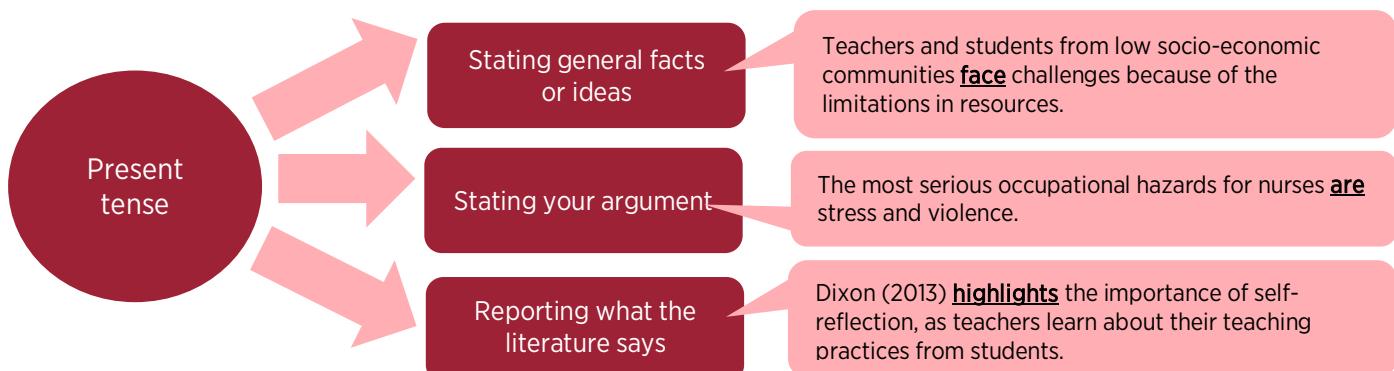
Recounting

Talking about things that happened in the past, usually in sequence, or reminding your reader of what you've already said.



Describing

Stating general ideas and the way things are, or explaining how things are related to each other.



Predicting

Stating what is likely to happen in the future, whether in your writing itself or out in the real world.

