Investigating Style:
Informal Elements in Academic Writing

A fully formal research writing style was standard in most disciplines until fairly recently. This style was associated with objectivity, the experimental method, and the disappearance of the researcher from the text. For example, in 1934 Albert Einstein wrote that there was no place for "I" in scientific writing. Although this style continues to predominate in certain fields, in others the need for strict formality has been relaxed. This formal academic style has a number of typical features: the avoidance of the first and second person pronouns "I" and "you," of contractions such as "isn't," and of colloquial expression such as "pretty nice." This style favors the use of the passive voice and of vocabulary of Latin, Greek, or French origin, choosing, for example, "eliminate" over "get rid of."

Chang and Swales (1999) investigated the occurrence of certain "informal" elements in research articles from three fields: statistics (science), linguistics (social science), and philosophy (arts and humanities). Ten recent articles were selected from each field for analysis. Among the features they investigated in the main text of the 30 articles were the following:

1. The use of imperatives ("Now consider this case.")
2. The use of I/my/me
3. Sentences beginning with but
4. Sentences beginning with and
5. Direct questions ("Is that correct?")
6. Verb contractions (won't, isn't)

As you may have guessed, such uses are often frowned on in style guides for academic and research writing. Now take a look at table 1.2, which presents a brief summary of the researchers' results.

Table 1.2. Occurrences of Six Informal Elements in 30 Research Articles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Element</th>
<th>Number of Occurrences</th>
<th>Average per Paper</th>
<th>Number of Authors Using Element</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Imperatives</td>
<td>639</td>
<td>21.3</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I/my/me</td>
<td>1,020</td>
<td>34.0</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initial but</td>
<td>349</td>
<td>11.6</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initial and</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct questions</td>
<td>224</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verb contractions</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Further Notes

1. All writers used one or more imperatives, but the philosophers used the least.

2. All the philosophers and all but one of the linguists used I/my/me, but only 4 out of 10 statisticians did.

3. There was only 1 sentence beginning with and in the 10 statistics papers, but there were 201 such sentences in philosophy!

4. None of the statisticians used verb contractions.
Task Nine

Take a photocopy of what you consider to be a good but typical paper from your own specialized area (one page is enough) and highlight or underline all occurrences of the six informal elements listed in the table above that you find. However, exclude all material from your analysis that is quoted from other authors or comes from interviews, speeches, or transcripts.

Bring your photocopy to class. You will share it in class via the document camera. Please be prepared to summarize your findings about these 6 informal elements. Your summary could be:

"None of these informal elements was found in this paper. Therefore, I think that my field requires more formal writing."

or

"I found many of these informal elements in the paper I chose. Therefore, I think it's okay to use them in my own writing."

The purpose of this task is to train your attention on the stylistic characteristics of writing in your own field. In effect, it asks you to skim for language rather than for content. Technically, the outcome of this process is known as rhetorical consciousness-raising.