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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Adjectives:</th>
<th>certain</th>
<th>clear</th>
<th>obvious</th>
<th>undeniable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>It is clear that…</td>
<td>The obvious conclusion is…</td>
<td>The idea that…is undeniable.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Adverbs:</th>
<th>certainly</th>
<th>clearly</th>
<th>obviously</th>
<th>undeniably</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>definitely</td>
<td>patently</td>
<td>undoubtedly</td>
<td>unequivocally</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>unquestionably</td>
<td>incontrovertibly</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- *It is definitely not the case that…*  
- *These anomalies are undoubtedly due to…*  
- *Smith states unequivocally that…*  
- *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

**Adjectives:**
- possible
- doubtful
- (im)probable
- conceivable
- (im)plausible
- uncertain
- (un)likely
- debatable

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>One possible reason is...</th>
<th>Though plausible, this theory is...</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Whether...is debatable.</td>
<td>It is quite conceivable that...</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Adverbs:**
- possibly
- arguably
- probably
- maybe
- plausibly
- perhaps
- conceivably
- doubtfully

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>It is probably true to say that...</th>
<th>It is arguably the case that...</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>These are, perhaps, valid points...</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>It could be the case that...</th>
<th>This might be true in some circumstances.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

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

**Verbs:**
- demonstrate
- reveal
- show
- suggest
- indicate
- imply
- prove
- signify

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure 1 shows that...</th>
<th>...as indicated in Table 3.1.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>These findings prove that...</td>
<td>As these results reveal, ...</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**.

**Phrases:**
- According to **Figure 5**, there are...
- As can be seen from **Table 1.7**, it is...
- **It can be seen from Plate 3** that...
- From this it can be inferred that...

(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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Adjectives:</th>
<th>first</th>
<th>initial</th>
<th>primary</th>
<th>main</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>principal</td>
<td>chief</td>
<td>key</td>
<td>prime</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

This essay looks firstly at…
Practitioners are principally concerned with…

Researchers initially focused on…

Expressing sequence – saying something is second or next

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Adverbs:</th>
<th>secondly</th>
<th>additionally (in addition)</th>
<th>furthermore</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>besides</td>
<td>subsequently</td>
<td>next</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition, it is important to…

Furthermore, the process must…

Besides this problem is the issue of…

Researchers subsequently turned to…

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

Expressing finality – saying something is last or in conclusion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Adverbs:</th>
<th>lastly</th>
<th>finally</th>
<th>overall</th>
<th>altogether</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ultimately</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Finally, this report examines…

There are, overall, three key issues that…

Altogether, the problem is not…

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…