Academic Writing Checklist

The following advice will help you improve your academic writing style:

1) **THIS:** Don’t say “This shows…” Instead, specify what “this” is.
   - **NO:** This shows how wide-sweeping such changes really are.
   - **YES:** This data shows how wide-sweeping such changes really are.
     - Tip: Use the “find” tool in Microsoft Word to locate every time you use the word “this.” Make sure every instance is referring to something specific.

2) **IT/THEY:** Use “it” and “they” sparingly. Sometimes, “it” and “they” are necessary components of a sentence that can’t be replaced with other words. Often, however, you can use much more specific terms in their place. Limit your use of “it” and “they” only to those instances where no other option would be as clear, or when replacing “it” or “they” would result in unneeded repetition.
   - **NO:** Bottling it up does not eliminate the problem.
   - **YES:** Bottling those feelings up does not eliminate the problem.
     - Tip: Use the “find” tool in Microsoft Word to locate every instance of “it” and “they” in your paper. Change as many as you can to more specific terms.

3) **TERMS:** Use subject-specific terminology. Do the research about your topic in advance, and make note of any recurring terms you see frequently. Use those terms in your paper. (Be careful not to go crazy with this, though—remember that clarity is key, so you don’t want to use SO much lofty terminology that you make your paper difficult to read.)
   - **NO:** The movie highlighted her face differently in each part.
   - **YES:** The film highlighted her face from different camera angles in each scene.

4) **QUESTIONS:** Don’t ask questions that aren’t immediately answered. Asking questions can be an effective rhetorical strategy, but only if used sparingly (don’t overdo it!) and only if those questions are actually answered in your paper.
   - **NO:** The question is, however, does Smith’s model provide a practical solution to the problem of how to formulate a strategy?
   - **YES:** The question is, however, does Smith’s model provide a practical solution to the problem of how to formulate a strategy? Many scholars, like Doe, insist it does not. Doe claims the model lacks the needed grass roots support to be effective.

5) **GENERALIZING:** Don’t overgeneralize. It’s true that writers shouldn’t be wishy-washy in presenting their stance, but they also shouldn’t make broad, sweeping statements that may not be entirely accurate.
   - **NO:** No one would be able to understand this treatise in its current form.
   - **YES:** Few citizens would be able to understand this treatise in its current form.
     - Tip: Try using some of these “hedging” words to prevent overgeneralization:
       - Usually, commonly, often, frequently, sometimes
       - Rarely, seldom, infrequently, occasionally
       - Most, a majority of, a high percentage of, a large number of
       - Few, a limited number of, a low percentage of, marginal
6) **ANNOUNCING:** Don’t make announcements. Instead of saying you’re going to discuss something in your paper, just jump in to discussing it!
   - **NO:** This paper will discuss the need for more community gardens in urban areas.
   - **YES:** There is a dire need for more community gardens in urban areas.

7) **OPINIONS:** Don’t say “I think” or “I believe.” If you’re writing it, we already know you believe it! Just state your claim as if it were fact.
   - **NO:** I believe the benefits of organic food should be featured more in primetime advertisements.
   - **YES:** The benefits of organic food should be featured more in primetime advertisements.

8) **ATTRIBUTION:** Don’t make empty statements. Attribute every claim to a specific source rather than leaving it vague and open-ended.
   - **NO:** It is generally suggested that carbon emissions negatively affect our planet.
   - **YES:** Scientists at Berkley have repeatedly suggested that carbon emissions negatively affect our planet.

9) **SOURCES:** When referring to specific scholars in your papers, introduce their full names and credentials first, then refer to them by their last name (or he/she) in all following instances.
   - **NO:** Bob suggests that the increasing rates of cellphone use should be cause for alarm.
   - **YES:** Bob Little, writer for the New York Times, suggests that the increasing rates of cellphone use should be cause for alarm. Little goes on to claim the problem is just going to get worse.

10) **TENSE:** When discussing texts, speak in the “literary present.” In other words, you should think of the texts as happening right now, not as happening in the past.
    - **NO:** In the beginning of the story, Emily found herself in a difficult situation.
    - **YES:** In the beginning of the story, Emily finds herself in a difficult situation.