

FORMAL WRITING HANDOUT

Formal Writing Voice

Have you ever attended an event in which "formal" attire is expected? You probably did not wear old jeans with holes in the knees, a stained tee shirt promoting your favorite beverage, and a pair of sandals. You probably chose more formal attire.

If you were giving an important speech to a group of people you did not know, would you use the same kind of language you use when talking with friends? Probably not. Recognizing your lack of familiarity with the audience, the importance of the occasion, your desire to demonstrate your knowledge of the subject, and the impression you would like to make, you would probably use a more formal voice for your speech than what you would use when speaking with close friends.

For all of the essays you write for this course, you should use a formal writing voice. You should use the kind of language you would use when giving an important speech, not the kind of language you might use when talking with close friends. A formal tone helps establish the writer's respect for the audience and suggests that the writer is serious about his or her topic. It is the kind of tone that educated people use when communicating with other educated people. Most academic writing uses a formal tone.

NOTE: The above did not follow the first two rules below. Hear how informal it sounds.

The following guidelines should help you maintain a formal writing voice in your essays.

The following are the rules to write in a formal, professional tone. The use of this handout is required.

1. Do not use first-person pronouns ("I," "me," "my," "we," "us," etc.).

Using these expressions in analytical and persuasive essays can make the writing wordy, can make the writer seem less confident of their ideas, and can give the writing an informal tone. Use of first-person pronouns is unnecessary in the kinds of essays and writing required for this course. Readers will know that they are reading the author's thoughts, beliefs, or opinions, so it is not necessary to state, "I think that," "I believe that," or "in my opinion." Simply delete these expressions for stronger sentences.

Example

I think that this character is confused.

This character is confused.

(The second sentence is less wordy, sounds more formal, and conveys a more confident tone.)

"One," "the reader," "readers," "the viewer," or something similar sometimes can be used effectively in place of first-person pronouns in formal papers, but be careful not to overuse these expressions. The goal is to sound formal/professional, not awkward and stiff.

Example

I can sense the character's confusion.

Readers can sense the character's confusion.

2. Avoid addressing readers as "you."

Addressing readers using second-person pronouns ("you, your") can make an writing sound informal.

Example

When you write for a newspaper, you have to have all the grammar right.

Newspaper writing requires correct grammar.

3. Avoid the use of contractions.

Contractions are shortened versions of words that use apostrophes in place of letters, such as "can't," "isn't," "she's," and "wouldn't." The more formal, non-contracted versions are "cannot," "is not," "she is," and "would not." Non-contracted versions of the words are more formal and carry a sense of credibility.

Example

The character isn't aware that he's surrounded by people he can't trust.

The character is not aware that he is surrounded by people he cannot trust.

Making your writing more formal by avoiding contractions is easy: just find the contractions and replace them with the non-contracted versions of the words.

4. Avoid colloquialism and slang expressions.

Colloquial diction is informal language used in everyday speech and includes such words as "guys," "yeah," "stuff," "kind of," "okay," and "big deal." Highly informal diction, such as "freak out" and "dissing," falls into the category of "slang." While slang words often are vivid and expressive, slang comes and goes quickly, another reason why slang should be avoided in formal writing. Both colloquialism and slang expressions convey an informal tone and should be avoided in formal writing.

Example

The guy was nailed for ripping off a liquor store.

The man was convicted of robbing a liquor store.

Native language speakers who learned English from a book in a classroom, may not know American or British slang. The first sentence would not make sense to them. They may know that "guy" is a "man." However they may think that "nailing" is a punishment for ripping something from a building. The sentence does not make sense. However, the revision would make sense to everyone who speaks English around the world.

5. Avoid nonstandard diction.

Nonstandard diction refers to expressions that are not considered legitimate words according to the rules of Standard English usage. Nonstandard diction includes "ain't," "theirselves," "hissself," "anyways," "alot" (the accepted version is "a lot"), and "alright" (the accepted version is "all right"). Most good dictionaries will identify such expressions with the word "Nonstandard."

6. Avoid abbreviated versions of words.

For example, instead of writing "photo," "phone" and "TV," write "photograph," "telephone," and "television."

The first time an abbreviation is required, first spell out the entire meaning of the abbreviation then put the abbreviation in parentheses.

For example: My son joined the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI).

After that, the abbreviation can be used in the balance of the written work.

Comments

Do not confuse formal diction with presumptuous diction (the kind of language that seems intended mainly to impress readers) or jargon (the kind of language only familiar to people within a specialized field, such as computer technicians). "

The goal is not to sound artificial. The goal through word choice is to portray oneself as an intelligent person aware of their audience--a group of well-educated people whom you do not know. It is the kind of language and writing one would use in an important job interview. .

Revised from

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Additional information on Formal/Professional Writing

Formal and Informal Writing
What is the difference?

In the Informal column are some common informal expressions we tend to use in speech, but should not be used in writing. The formal column offers suggested alternatives.

Informal

this
you
start
guy
kid
lady
too
totally
but
and
so
have to
right now

Formal

a / an some
we / one / people
begin
man / gentleman
child / youth
woman
also / as well
completely / entirely
however
furthermore / additionally
therefore
must / be required to
at once

The use of slang should always be avoided when writing articles for the newspaper. Listed below are some examples of this informal writing style. Please avoid the use of slang in your articles.

Sentence using **Slang**

Some of the students made a **big stink**
about the early closing of the cafeteria.

Replace with **big issue**.

Sentence using **Slang**

The movie was a **bomb**.

Replace with **bad**

The movie was poorly edited.

Sentence using **Slang**

Calm down. Don't **blow your cool**.

Replace with **become angry**

Sentence using **Slang**

It's OK. Don't get so **bent**.

Replace with **angry**

Sentence using **Slang**

Don't be a **chicken**

Replace with **coward**

When creating important communications via email, memos or letters, the formal writing style creates a more professional impression.

Below are examples of both an informal and formal memo.

Yo guys, I am having a barbeque this weekend at my crib. I am inviting you all to come and enjoy yourselves. Be there or be square!!

The Boss

Dear Staff Members, I am having a barbeque at my home this weekend. I would be delighted if you could attend. I look forward to seeing you.

Sincerely,

The Editor

How to Avoid Colloquial (Informal) Writing

While it may be acceptable in friendly e-mails and chat rooms, excessive colloquialism is a major pitfall that has brought down the quality of formal, written text. Here are some steps/tips that you can follow to help to improve your overall writing:

Steps

1. **Know the meaning of colloquialism.** This can best be described as "writing in the way that one would speak." It is an informal, slang style of English that should be reserved primarily for speech, as it can

seem unprofessional and sloppy in written text. A casual tone can be interpreted positively in person with face-to-face contact, but can be perceived negatively in writing.

2. **Understand basic English punctuation**. This might seem of negligible value at first, but when people speak, we usually disregard certain rules that are mandatory in writing. For example, we usually omit pauses that are required in formal writing, which are usually denoted by commas.
3. **Avoid using common colloquial words/expressions**, as listed below. Again, these are words that, while acceptable in speech, should not be used in formal writing.
4. **Avoid using "filler" words**. These words are not necessary, and should be removed.
 - **Basically** – At best, it can be used to begin a sentence, but there are better choices available to replace the word, if it is not omitted entirely. E.g. "A microphone is **basically** a device that is used to record sound."
 - **Even** – Often, this word is found as an "additive" to a series, as in the following example, but is generally not needed. E.g. "The basket contained eggs, sandwiches, and **even** utensils."
 - **Just** – When used in the same context as **BASICALLY**, this is another overused filler word that one should omit. E.g. "When pouring the solution, **just** be certain not to spill its contents."
 - **Well** – Generally used to begin a sentence following a question. E.g. "Why is global warming a problem? **Well**, one major issue is the..."
5. **Avoid contractions**. Some people suggest that when writing formal papers, write out your contractions. This depends on how formal you need to be. If you need to exterminate contractions, here are some suggestions: Replace *can't* with *cannot*, *doesn't* with *does not*, and so on. For example, instead of writing "Therefore, this **can't** be used as evidence in the case", write "Therefore, this **cannot** be used as evidence in the case."
6. **Limit your use of subjective pronouns**. If you are writing a formal, objective piece of writing, then you should avoid using the words "I," "me," "you," and "we". To avoid this, try writing from the third-person perspective. Formal business letters are an exception, as well as instructional text, such as this article.
7. **Avoid splitting infinitives**. An infinitive is a verb preceded by the word "to," such as "to go" or "to want". When writing, some experts suggest that you should keep your infinitives together, rather than separating them with other words. For example, substitute "He tried **to not sneeze** in the library, but failed" with "He tried not **to sneeze** in the library, but failed."
 - If you wish to use it for emphasis, as in, "He meant **to never sneeze** but sometimes couldn't help it", most professional editors would accept that. Note that this is now considered an archaic rule and professionals at all levels of writing will use either form as it suits their purpose.
8. **Avoid ending your sentences with a preposition**. In *most* cases, it is inappropriate to end a sentence with a preposition [i.e. *down, during, in, into, of, since*]. For example, replace "What is the bag filled **with**?" with "What is inside the bag?"
 - There is much controversy over the formality/informality of ending a sentence with a preposition. There are cases where an additional preposition may be regarded as a filler word, as in "Where are you at?", but others where "less is more" applies. A good example is Winston Churchill's playoff on this rule, with his quote, "This is the sort of English up with which I will not put", in place of "This is the sort of English I shall not put up with." For clarity reasons, the latter is preferable.
9. **Avoid clichés**. Clichés are phrases that have been exhausted to the point where they have completely lost originality.
 - Hercules was as **strong as an ox**. My grandfather was so strong that he once lifted the rear end of a Volkswagon Beetle.
 - I have to give an **arm and a leg** to find a parking spot during the holiday season.
 - There are **loads of** websites on the Internet.
10. **Avoid stage directions**. Do not begin an essay by telling the reader what the paper will discuss.
 - "This paper is going to talk about how..."

11. **Avoid vague words.** Vague words can be described as words that are open to interpretation or that don't express your ideas as well as more precise words would.
- There are **a few** ways to solve the equation.
 - She made **enough** food.

Common Colloquial Words & Expressions

- A lot – This phrase should be replaced with a stronger something less informal, such as "several", or "many". Keep in mind that "alot" is not a word.
 - "He has **a lot** of reasons for justifying his actions."
 - "He has **several** reasons for justifying his actions."
- Ain't – The word "ain't" has been incorrectly used as a contraction for "am not", "is not", "are not", "has not", and "have not". "Ain't" should never appear within formal writing.
 - "This **ain't** working."
 - "This **is not** working."
- Alright – This word is *always* nonstandard, and should not be used in formal writing. It is a compound of "all right."
 - "**Alright**, I am ready to go."
 - "**All right**, I am ready to go."
- Anyways – The word "anyways" is also always nonstandard and should usually not be used in formal writing. You should always use "anyway."
 - "**Anyways**, thank you for your time."
 - "**Anyway**, thank you for your time."
- Could of, would of, should of – These are incorrect phrases, usually the result of trying to write what one hears (or thinks one hears). The phrases "could **have**", "would **have**", and "should **have**" are correct.
- Get – From time to time, this word replaces "understand."
 - "Do you **get** the homework?"
 - "Do you **understand** the homework?"
- Got – In this context, "got" should be replaced with "have."
 - "Do you **got** an extra pen?"
 - "Do you **have** an extra pen?"
- Gonna, Wanna – These are the condensed versions of "going to" and "want to", respectively, which should be revised in formal writing accordingly.
 - "I am **gonna** go to the supermarket."
 - "I am **going to** go to the supermarket."
- Kinda, kind of – The use of these words to mean "somewhat" or "rather" is informal, and should be avoided. KIND OF, when meant as "type of", is acceptable, but is somewhat overused in language. Consider replacing with "type of."
 - "It is **kind of** cold outside."
 - "It is **rather** cold outside."
 - "A parakeet is a **kind of** bird."
 - "A parakeet is a **type of** bird."
- Like – Consider replacing with "as if," "similar to," or "such as," depending on the context.
 - "It is **like** he never existed."
 - "It is **as if** he never existed."
- Okay – This word is a derivative of "O.K.," which appeared as an abbreviation for "oll korrekt" (a conscious misspelling of "all correct") in 1839. It is similar to "alright."
 - "Is everyone **okay**?"
 - "Is everyone **all right**?"

- Pretty – Using this word tends to weaken one's argument, when used in place of "very", and should be either replaced or eliminated entirely.
 - "I think that this is a **pretty good** investment that your company should consider."
 - "I think that this is a **very worthwhile** investment that your company should consider."
- Real, really – Replace the word "real", as used in this context.
 - "The coffee is **real** hot!"
 - "The coffee is **very** hot!"
- Sorta, sort of – Similar to KINDA and KIND OF, these should be replaced when used to mean "rather" or "somewhat."
 - "The project is **sorta** long."
 - "The project is **somewhat** long."
- Use to – The proper form of this phrase, in writing, should be "used to". In speech, the **d** is sometimes silent, which makes for the confusion in writing.
 - "As a child, I **use to** go to nursery school."
 - "As a child, I **used to** go to nursery school."

Example

John,

I'm looking for a job and I've heard through the grapevine that you're looking for a workhorse to basically run the shop with. Well, I'm the man of the hour, cause I've got a lot to offer. I'm pretty hard-working, and I'm really good about being on time. I'm use to working by myself. Anyways, let me know if you want to get together for an interview, okay?

-Unprofessional Joe

Dear John:

I understand that you are looking for a strong worker to assist in your shop. I would appreciate consideration because I am diligent, punctual, and accustomed to working with minimal supervision. Please contact me for an interview where I can fully explain my assets to the company. Thank you for your time.

Respectfully,

Professional Joe

Tips

- Remember that less is more. Having a long, verbose paragraph does not necessarily mean that it is meaningful. You can help to eliminate wordiness by writing in active tense, as opposed to passive tense.
- Do not use slang..
- Writing will sound stronger if you remove adverbial phrases and replace them with more meaningful words. For example, "very good" can be replaced with "excellent," "very nice" becomes "delightful," "very bad," becomes "terrible," "definitely true," becomes "obvious," and so on. As a general guideline, try to avoid the "-y" words.

- Similarly, limit use of "absolute" terms, such as "everyone," "always," "never." Unless relaying an indisputable fact, these highly opinionated words will weaken writing. For example, "He **always** buys the most expensive shoes" could be revised to "He **usually** buys the more expensive shoes."
- Try not to think of proper writing as strictly "academic." Formal/professional writing makes you appear more intelligent. More importantly, it eliminates the risk of "slipping out" bad habits in situations where it is critical to convey properness, such as writing a college essay, or a job résumé.
- Don't overthink it. For most of the above steps, *avoidance* is the idea, not total elimination. An occasional cliché or vague word is not going to ruin your writing.
- [Expand your vocabulary](#)! Mastering new verbs can allow you to bring color to a paper by eliminating the need to employ the same words over and over again.
- [Read](#)! Reading will not only help to improve vocabulary, but it will also help to distinguish between formal and informal writing.
- [Use a thesaurus](#) Add variety to writing. Warning: be sure the true meaning of the thesaurus word is known.

END.