

Formal Academic Writing

In your assignments for class, you should not address the academic community in the same way you would talk to your friends for the simple reason that your academic writing needs to be both objective and persuasive. Writing that is too casual is typically not as convincing as more formal writing. Here are some general guidelines for learning to write formally, which can improve grades and prepare you for the professional world.

Do . . .

✓ Use Precise Language and Effective Words

Correct word usage: To achieve proper diction, you need to use the word that both has the exact denotation (dictionary definition) AND connotation (the accepted meaning of a word) that you are intending to express. Always use a dictionary along with a thesaurus. (See section W5 of *A Writer's Reference*.)

Example: firm = steady (positive); stubborn = unreasonable (negative)

Precise words: Another common mistake students make is using vague or informal words.

Faulty: It is really awesome just how creepy the characters in "A Rose for Emily" are.

Revised: Through his use of tone and symbolism, Faulkner creates mysterious and complex characters in "A Rose for Emily."

✓ Present Others' Arguments Fairly and with an Appropriate Tone

When presenting a position or an argument with which you disagree, be sure to describe this argument accurately and without biased language. According to *Everything's an Argument*, "Most academic argument adopts the voice of a reasonable, fair-minded, and careful thinker who is interested in coming as close to the truth about a topic as possible" (390). Your tone should also be one that is authoritative. You should confidently state the strengths of your arguments, using language that is neutral, not combative.

✓ Use Active Instead of Passive Voice

You should avoid using passive voice because doing so makes it unclear which person or thing is performing the action. If you are unsure about this, you should conduct further research to find out more about your topic.

Passive voice: The law was passed in October. (Who passed the law?)

Active voice: The city council passed the property tax law in October.

✓ Say It; Do Not Say That You Will Say It

Do not tell the audience what you are going to do or say in the paper; just say it.

Faulty: In this paper, I will analyze the arguments against handgun control.

Revised: Arguments against handgun control are unconvincing because . . .

✓ Use Concise Language

Wordiness is often a sign that your thoughts need greater refinement. Furthermore, wordiness can convey a pretentious tone or be confusing to the reader. Instead, write in a clear and direct style. (See section W2 of *A Writer's Reference*.)

Wordy: The reason why most people want to travel is that they want to experience other cultures.

Concise: Most people want to travel to experience other cultures.

Do Not Use . . .

X Contractions

Examples: they're → they are can't → cannot it's → it is or it has

X First- or Second-person Pronouns (I, Me, My; We, Us, Our; You, Your)

First- or second-person pronouns should not be used in your paper, unless your instructor specifically says otherwise. Using third-person pronouns (he/she/it, him/her/it, his/her/its; they/them/their) or nouns puts distance between yourself and the audience, creating a more formal tone for the paper. (See *A Writer's Reference*, p. 124.)

Faulty: I believe that capital punishment is wrong because . . .

Revised: Capital punishment is wrong because . . . (The audience will assume this is what you believe.)

Faulty: To go on vacation, you have to save hundreds of dollars for airfare, food, and hotels.

Revised: To go on vacation, travelers have to save hundreds of dollars for airfare, food, and hotels.

X Language That Is Racially Offensive or Sexually Skewed

Use names for racial, ethnic, and other groups that reflect the preferences of each group's members. Avoid labels that (intentionally or not) disparage the person or group to whom you refer. Avoid the exclusionary "he" by using "he or she." To keep this from becoming cumbersome, use a plural noun with a third-person plural pronoun whenever possible and update your sentences to be consistent. (See *A Writer's Reference*, pp. 156-64.)

X Slang, Jargon, Clichés, and Conversational Language

These are often too imprecise and informal for communicating effectively to the audience. Instead, write EXACTLY what you mean. "Stuff" and "things" are common examples of vague language that should be revised.

Slang/Conversational Language: The story talks about a whole bunch of stuff that changes many things in the main character's life. (Which "story"? What "stuff"? What "things" change in the character's life?)

Revised: Ray Carver's "Cathedral" describes the transformation that occurs in the protagonist's life when he encounters a disabled man who shows him how to perceive other people in new and empowering ways.

Cliché: Rebuilding New Orleans is easier said than done.

Revised: In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, rebuilding the city requires foresight, grit, and hard work— and billions of dollars.

X Pretentious Language and Euphemisms

Avoid using words just because they "sound clever." Unless they mean specifically what you want to say, words that are showy or evasive should be replaced with clearer, more direct language. (See *A Writer's Reference*, pp. 156-64.)

Pretentious: To perpetuate our endeavor of providing funds for our elderly citizens, as we do at the present moment, we will face the exigency of enhanced contributions from all our citizens.

Revised: Citizens cannot continue to fund Social Security for the elderly unless we raise taxes.

X Ambiguous References

In formal writing, students should avoid the phrase "in many ways" as well as "it is" and "there are" constructions. (See *A Writer's Reference*, pp. 150-52; *So What? The Writer's Argument*, pp. 221-24.)

Faulty: It is not fair that administrators make all decisions that affect students in many ways.

Revised: School administrators make all policy decisions, which can impact students' schedules and finances.

Faulty: There are lots of opportunities for good students.

Revised: Opportunities in fields such as medicine, high-tech, and education abound for intelligent, hard-working college graduates.