

Formal Academic Writing

Writing is like talking; however, students should not address the academic community in the same way that they would talk to their friends. Writing in a formal academic setting can be a struggle. Here are some general guidelines for learning to write formally, which can help your 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 has the exact denotation (definition) AND connotation (the secondary meaning of a word that can carry associations or feelings) that you are intending to express. Always use a dictionary with the thesaurus!

Ex.: **firm**= steady (positive); **stubborn**=unreasonable (negative) (*The Little, Brown Handbook* 520)

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

Example: It was really awesome just how creepy the characters in "A Rose for Emily" were.

Revised: Faulkner, through his use of tone and symbolism, creates mysterious and complex characters.

✓ Present others' arguments fairly and with an appropriate tone

When presenting a position or argument that you disagree with, be sure to describe this argument accurately, without loaded or biased language. You should "[r]ecognize opposing views, . . . state them fairly (if you don't, you do a disservice not only to the opposition but to your own position, because the perceptive reader will not take you seriously), and be temperate in arguing your own position" (*Current Issues & Enduring Questions* 181). 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 Rather than Passive Voice

Writers should avoid passive voice because it is unclear who/what the actor is; if you are unsure about this, you should conduct further research in order to know more about your topic.

Passive voice: The law was passed in October 2007. (Who passed the law?)

Active voice: Mayor Jones passed the law in order to be re-elected in November.

✓ 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. See chapter 39 of *The Little, Brown Handbook*.

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.

Don't Use....

✗ Contractions

Ex. You're → You are Can't → Cannot

✗ Personal Pronouns ("I, we, our, you")

Personal pronouns should normally not be used in your paper; third person puts distance between the audience and yourself, creating a more formal tone for the paper (*The Little, Brown Handbook* 133).

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

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

**Note: For some 1301 or other class assignments, professors may allow or even ask you to use "I." In this scenario, feel free to do so; however, "you" should only be used when you are addressing the audience directly as in this handout. Ask yourself who you really mean. Replace "you" with "one," "people," or another specific label.

Inappropriate: In order to travel, you have to save hundreds of dollars for gasoline.

Revised: In order to travel, one has (or Americans have) to save hundreds of dollars for gasoline.

✗ Language that is Biased or Racially or Sexually Offensive

- Avoid the generic "he" by using "he or she"; if this becomes a burden, utilize the plural "they" instead.
- Avoid labels that (intentionally or not) disparage the person or group you refer to.
- Use names for racial, ethnic, and other groups that reflect the preferences of each group's members.
- Reference chapter 37 of *The Little, Brown Handbook* to learn more language to avoid.

✗ Slang, Jargon, Clichés, and Conversational Language

These are often too imprecise and informal for communicating effectively to the audience; write EXACTLY what you mean. "Stuff" and "things" are common examples of vague language to revise.

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

Clichés: Rebuilding New Orleans is easier said than done (for more, see pg. 528 of *The LBH*)

✗ Pretentious Language/Euphemisms

Words that are big, showy, or evasive should be replaced with more direct language. One form of pretentious writing is a euphemism, which is a presumably inoffensive word that a writer substitutes for a word deemed potentially offensive or too blunt (*The Little, Brown Handbook* 513-14).

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.

✗ Ambiguous references

Be as specific as possible for the audience; in formal writing, students should avoid the phrase "in many ways" as well as "there is" and "it is" constructions.

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

Revised: Administrators make all decisions for the school, affecting students' independence and finances.

Ambiguous: Parents and students waste time arguing. They should just give up some of their authority. (Who should give up their authority? Students or parents?)

Revised: Parents and students waste time arguing; parents should relinquish some authority.