

Formal vs. Informal Writing

When writing for either an English class, a prospective employer, a business letter, or a letter of complaint, it is important that you write formally. On such occasions, we do not write in the same manner as we speak everyday. Everyday language, whether speech or written down, is called *informal*. We write formally to, among other things, demonstrate that we are serious, educated, and intelligent.

To write formally, the vocabulary we use must reflect the occasion. To understand formal language, it is often easier to identify informal language and eliminate it from our writing. If we can do that, we end up writing more formally. It is almost as simple as that.

General Rule: If you would not say it to your grandmother, do not use it in formal writing.

INFORMAL	FORMAL	REASON
Slang: dude, bro, bloke, guy	person, friend	You are trying to sound professional, sophisticated or mature. Greeting someone with "Yo dude!" does not make you sound intelligent.
Colloquialisms: kid(s) Okay, or OK you know sort of kind of alot, a lot I have <i>a lot</i> of friends.	child(ren), youth(s), student(s) satisfactory, acceptable filler words - cut from your writing many I have <i>many</i> friends.	A kid is actually a baby goat! "Okay" is a casual expression, not a formal expression. We use "filler words" in speech to fill in spaces when we do not want silence or when we are still processing what we are going to say. There is no need for that in our writing. <i>"Alot" is not even a word!</i> "A lot" is better, but still rather informal. Use "many" instead.
Slurring gonna	going to	We need to pronounce (and write) our words clearly. Slurring words like "going to" into "gonna" makes us sound lazy (either in speech or in writing). This applies the same for "coulda, shoulda, and woulda."

INFORMAL	FORMAL	REASON
<p>Contractions: don't, can't, won't, shouldn't, etc.</p>	<p>do not, cannot, will not, should not, etc.</p>	<p>While contractions <i>are</i> becoming more common in formal writing, they are still largely seen as inappropriate. Similarly to slurring speech, contractions give the impression of laziness.</p>
<p>Abbreviations: TV, photo, pics, or PC</p>	<p>television, photograph, pictures, personal computer</p>	<p>Abbreviations give the impression that you are lazy and cannot be bothered writing out the words longform. Avoid using abbreviations in your formal writing.</p>
<p>Double negatives: I ain't never gonna do that.</p>	<p>I will never do that.</p>	<p>Double negatives can be confusing to understand and are unnecessary.</p>
INFORMAL	FORMAL	REASON
<p>Clichés: It's like beating a dead horse. Avoid it like the plague. He worked like a dog. To the bitter end.</p>	<p>It is useless. It is futile. Make sure that you avoid it. He worked very hard. Until the end.</p>	<p>Clichés are overused and have lost either their full meaning or intended effect. Avoid clichés in your writing.</p>
<p>Capitalization: i, david, canada, toyota</p>	<p>I, David, Canada, Toyota</p>	<p>Proper nouns (the names of particular places, people or things) <i>always</i> take capital letters. The first letter in sentences <i>always</i> takes a capital letter.</p>