

Formal and informal writing

Men living in democratic ages do not readily comprehend the utility of forms; they feel an instinctive contempt for them.

--Alexis de Tocqueville

The distinction between "formal" and "informal" writing was probably easier to grasp when American culture was more sensitive to "form," in the sense of that word which pairs attendance at work, school, or entertainments with particular "forms" of dress or "forms" of behavior. As Alexis de Tocqueville observed in the early nineteenth century, we often feel that rules and standards that dictate dress or manners violate our sense of democracy. Why shouldn't we go to a Wall Street interview in shorts? Why shouldn't we call the President of the College by his first name? Why can't we write a paper any way we please?

The concept of register

The difference between "formal" and "informal" is *not* that between "grammatical" and "ungrammatical." The difference is best understood as an instance of what linguists call *register*. The speaker of any language learns at a very young age that certain speech situations call for certain ways of putting words together. A child of six or seven will speak one way to fellow children, another way to parents, and perhaps even a third way to teachers. Adults speak one way to children and another way to adult friends and colleagues. What varies in these diverse situations is not simply tone of voice and vocabulary (the insertion of *please* and *thank you*, for example, in children's exchanges with adults) but syntax as well: the English professor who studiously adheres to noun-pronoun agreement rules when addressing students (*Everyone* has *his or her* weakness) may well kick up his or her heels at home and join the majority of English speakers in employing the "singular their" (*Everyone* has *their* weakness).

In written as well as spoken English, we all command a variety of registers. Not only do you use different registers in writing a History paper and writing to a friend, you also use different registers in writing to a friend and writing to a prospective employer.

The social dimension

It is social rather than grammatical codes that determine the register we adopt in a given situation - which returns us to Tocqueville's point. Americans seem to harbor an instinctive distrust of all social codes (rivaled only, Tocqueville noted, by their countervailing passion for social conformity). This distrust has its healthy consequences, but it also makes it hard for us, at times, to acknowledge the inherently social nature of much human behavior, linguistic behavior included.

The relation between writer and audience is a social relation, of which the relation between student writer and

professorial audience is a particular instance. In saying that the latter calls for a "formal" register, we mean that it requires your adherence to a number of [conventions](#). A few of these conventions are listed below. You should note that they do not carry equal weight with all of your professors; for example, not all professors object to the use of contractions. When in doubt about the requirements of your [audience](#), ask.

By convention, formal prose is usually ...

- **Conservative.** Conservative prose has no necessary connection with conservative politics. Adopting conservative usage means hewing to those linguistic practices that bear professional writers' and editors' stamp of approval. (See *The Guide's* page on [Grammar and Usage](#).) To familiarize yourself with these practices, you should consider purchasing a guide to usage such as *The New Fowler's Modern English Usage* (ed. R.W. Burchfield) or bookmarking some of the usage references at [Bartleby.com](#). (Note that some of the references on this site are comparatively old. They are still helpful - some aspects of usage change more rapidly than others - but you should check the advice in older references against that in newer ones on the site.)
- **Contraction-free.** Written for students and faculty in an effort to provide friendly advice in an informal tone of comfortable common sense, *The Guide* frequently resorts to contractions, which tend to make written English sound a bit more like its spoken equivalent. The audience and purpose of a college essay are different; there, the informality of contractions may suggest to your professor that you have failed to treat the subject-matter of your essay, not to mention the course itself, with due seriousness.
- **Restrained.** Coarse language and slang betoken a casual rather than a serious approach to your subject, and they may convince your reader that you lack the energy or resolve to think of more precise ways to express dissatisfaction, disagreeableness, or disruption.
- **Impersonal.** Most formal writing aims to establish an air of objectivity and impartiality, an air with which the personal pronouns *I*, *me*, and *my* seem inconsistent. In truth, objectivity results from proper use of evidence and logic rather than pronoun choices, but there is something to be said for *seeming* as well as *being* objective. Moreover, some professors prohibit their students from using first-person pronouns as a kind of discipline: many students do inject personal opinions and unexamined assumptions where persuasiveness demands objective evidence, and prohibiting personal pronouns seems to help curb this tendency.

This is, however, just the kind of matter on which you would do well to consult the professor who has assigned your paper. Some professors - particularly in the humanities - take issue with the ideal of objectivity itself on philosophical grounds. These professors may encourage you to highlight the personal, subjective, and situated dimension of your observations and reasoning.

The second-person singular pronoun - *you* - raises a similar issue when used to refer to a hypothetical rather than a real individual. Consider the following sentence:

You eat peas with a fork, not with a knife.

This *you* is not a definite person who chooses to eat peas with one utensil rather than another. The meaning of the sentence is actually something like, "Peas should be eaten with a fork, not with a knife." This *you* is a fictional character who in sentences of this kind also frequently goes by the name *one*, and who is standing in for a whole class of persons.

The fictional *you* is a welcome character in speech and informal writing but is perhaps best left out of formal writing. Since your reader, too, is *you*, the hypothetical or indefinite *you* may seem to cross a little too far into the reader's space for the maintenance of an impersonal air.

Again, however, it pays to check with your professor. Those who tolerate a little more informality or believe that writing should indeed strive to transgress personal boundaries will likely have no objection to the fictional *you*.

- **Properly documented.** A professor who reads forty or fifty essays frequently looks for particular information from each essay. Thus it is helpful to the professor when students follow standard forms of documentation; the form itself conveys as much information as the meanings of the writers' words. For example, a title in italics suggests a published work of considerable length. Therefore, you wouldn't italicize the title of a published article or the title of your own unpublished paper.