

Formal and Informal English

The difference between formal and informal English is not a difference between *correct* and *incorrect*, but a difference of what is known as *register*. A register is a variety of language related to a particular subject matter or area of activity, a set of words and expressions as well as syntactical features that may be said to characterise that specific area of language. There are many registers: technical, academic, mathematical, scientific, etc. Very broadly speaking, we can also speak of a “formal” and “informal” register in English. In writing academic reports and the like, it would be normal to draw most of the vocabulary and expressions from the formal register, and few, if any, from the informal. This entails avoiding colloquial (everyday) or slang expressions in your writing assignments. The question of register is far more complicated than indicated here; for example, there are many degrees of formality and informality. However, below are listed a few examples which may be of practical assistance.¹

Differences of formal & informal:

Formal language, even when spoken, is often associated with the conventions expected of written standard English.

Formal English follows rules of grammar very strictly. Sentences tend to be longer and more complex. The vocabulary tends to be elevated, using big words and avoiding colloquial or slang vocabulary. It avoids split infinitives and prepositions at the end of sentences.

Formal language uses a Latinate vocabulary and rhetorical devices to create literary-like effects.

Informal language is characterized by a simpler grammatical structure (i.e. loosely-connected sentences and phrases), and personal evaluation. Informal language may make use of slang and colloquialisms, employing the conventions of spoken language. However, it is too casual and loose to be acceptable for academic writing.

<p>Informal</p> <p>They did an experiment</p> <p>Then the Drive Manager goes through some steps to install the programme</p> <p>One after the other</p> <p>They found out what the important things were</p> <p>You can find out all about the survey on page 7</p> <p>We think you should discuss the research findings at the next departmental meeting</p> <p>Doctors have come up with a new method of....</p> <p>Safety officers are looking into the problem</p> <p>The cost of cleaning services has gone up 25% over the last three years</p>	<p>Formal</p> <p>The experiment was carried out / performed</p> <p>The Drive Manager then performs / executes a series of functions / operations in order to install the programme</p> <p>At regular intervals</p> <p>They determined / discovered / established / identified the important properties / characteristics / issues</p> <p>Details of the survey are to be found on page 7</p> <p>It is recommended that the research findings are discussed at the next departmental meeting</p> <p>Doctors have created / established a new method of....</p> <p>Safety officers are investigating the problem</p> <p>The cost of cleaning services has risen by 25% over the last three years</p>
<p>Informal</p> <p>We do not think it is a good idea to do anything at the moment</p> <p>Many thanks to the staff at “Computers R Us” for their help on the technical side</p> <p>You need to get the patient’s help when doing these hearing tests</p>	<p>Formal</p> <p>It is suggested that no action should be taken at this stage</p> <p>Thanks are extended to the staff at “Computers R Us” for their technical support</p> <p><i>(Slightly less formal: We would like to thank)</i></p> <p>When conducting these audiological tests, the active participation of the patient being tested is required.</p>

<p>There were no big differences between the three different groups we tested</p> <p>A lot of</p> <p>This seemed to fix the problem</p> <p>Enough</p> <p>This shows that ...</p> <p>Numbers are going up</p> <p>They put the plan into action</p> <p>This let them keep the same temperature during the whole experiment</p> <p>These results are because of factors like weight, age ...</p>	<p>No significant differences emerged between the three different groups tested</p> <p>Many / much / a great deal of</p> <p>This appeared to rectify the problem</p> <p>Sufficient</p> <p>This demonstrates...</p> <p>Numbers are increasing</p> <p>The plan was implemented / carried out</p> <p>This allowed / permitted / resulted in / ensured a constant temperature throughout the experiment / for the entire experiment</p> <p>These results are dependent on factors such as weight, age ...</p>
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rules of formal:

There are certain things that can be done in spoken English or in written English in newspapers, magazines, or lecture notes or web pages which are not appropriate for formal writing.

In formal English you have to be aware of the followings:

- Don't start a sentence with 'And', 'Also', 'But', 'So', 'Or', 'Even so'. Instead use 'In addition', 'However', 'Hence', 'Consequently', 'Alternatively', 'Nevertheless'.
- Don't start a sentence with 'Therefore'. Instead write, for example, 'We therefore...'
- Don't start a sentence with 'Then' or 'Now' unless it is a command.
- Don't use 'don't', or any other shortened negative such as 'isn't', 'hasn't', 'wasn't', etc. Use 'does not', 'is not', etc. instead.
- Don't use '!' or '&' or '/'. It is also very unusual to see '?' in a paper. Don't put questions in a paper unless you really know what you are doing.
- Don't use e.g. or i.e. or etc.
- When referring to the number of countable objects, use words rather than figures when the amount is less than twenty. E.g. Don't write "we used 3 methods" - instead write "we used three methods".
- Don't use 'OK'. Use 'acceptably', 'permissible', 'satisfactory', etc instead.
- Don't use 'got'. Instead use 'obtained'.
- If you can, try to use the passive voice for some of the time when describing your results. Using 'we' in every sentence is a bit boring.
- List things properly using 'and' between the last two items. E.g. Don't do 'we used three methods A, B, C.' Instead you should write either 'we used three methods: A, B, and C.' or 'we used three methods, namely, A, B, and C.'
- You cannot have a paragraph that is just one sentence.

A Final Word

As hinted at in the introduction, it is not always easy to choose the right level at which to pitch the language of an assignment. All academic work should generally be presented in a reasonably formal style, and should not normally use a lot of everyday “street” language. But this does not mean that it should be excessively stuffy and formal either. On the contrary, saying something clearly and simply is one of the requirements of good scientific writing.

The whole question of style is open to a certain amount of discussion in the academic world. For example, students often wonder whether they should use “I” or “we”, and how much they should use the passive construction². Reference to the author in person should normally be kept to a minimum, especially in the orthodox quantitative sciences (physics, chemistry, biology etc.), although you will encounter many academic papers in other areas (e.g. the social sciences) where “I” or “we” may be used quite extensively. A good rule to remember is that everything in your paper is actually attributable to you, the author, unless you give specific references or indication to the contrary, so the use of “I” may simply be unnecessary. Neither is it important to hear what you personally feel about any issues not directly related to the subject of your paper. As stated earlier, the passive is still considered characteristic of much technical writing in particular, and has the added advantage of focusing on the event or the result (which is what is important) and not the person. On the other hand, too much use of the passive can seem heavy, and it is perhaps a good idea to include one or two active sentences occasionally, if only for variation. In short, you need to get a feel for the kind of style that is acceptable in your area of study.

Often formal writing is more precise than informal, because it includes more specific terminology. This does not mean, however, that we should try to over-elaborate our language in order to make it seem more “meaningful”, as the following example shows:

Before [revision]

If there are any points on which you require explanation or further particulars we shall be glad to furnish such additional details as may be required by telephone.

After [revision]

If you have any questions, please ring.



It is crucial to learn to differentiate between **levels of usage**; essays and reports require a more formally constructed language than everyday speech. It is all too easy to pepper written work with [colloquial](#) phrases or weak constructions that come naturally to mind but are incorrect or inadequate in the context of formal writing.

Language is sometimes rather arbitrarily divided into three major styles: formal, informal, and popular (vulgar). While there is some overlap between them, they operate under different conditions and achieve different ends.

Formal English is, for the most part, a written language. In general, it is confined to the realm of the serious: textbooks, academic or technical works, and most essays you will write at university. You would write formally in a letter of application for a job. Formal language tends to be impersonal and precise, and often uses long, carefully constructed sentences; the formal writer will avoid contractions and abbreviations, and will use a more specialized and complex vocabulary than that employed in everyday speech.

One must, however, beware of excess. Formal writing can easily become incomprehensible because it is too convoluted or wordy. In recent years the proliferation of [jargon](#) has become altogether too general. Despite its sophistication, formal language must remain clear.

Informal English is the language spoken by most people every day. While educated speakers retain their knowledge of formal rules, they're more relaxed about grammar and less concerned with vocabulary when they're engaged in ordinary conversation. Informal writing reflects this relaxation. Sentences are shorter, and tend to avoid the more formal punctuation of the semi-colon and colon. Contractions and the first person are acceptable. Newspaper articles and columns are usually written informally, and you use informal language when you write to your friends.

While the [dictionary of word usage \(16Kb\)](#) is designed to help students avoid mistakes in formal writing, it has been prepared in a relatively informal style to make it more enjoyable to read (try taking it on your next holiday). Informal language is not necessarily inferior to formal; it simply serves a different purpose and is directed to a different audience. The essays of Mark Twain, the novels of Margaret Atwood and the film reviews of Pauline Kael are acclaimed works whose style is largely informal.

Popular English can be colourful and highly expressive, but it is out of place in any writing unless you are reporting speech. In everyday speech, imprecision of meaning or poverty of vocabulary can be compensated for by enthusiastic verbal expression, but you can't wave your hands around, or vary your voice for emphasis when you are writing. Many of the errors in usage covered in the dictionary which follows are a result of a lack of awareness of the difference between written and spoken English.

Here are some examples of how vocabulary changes in each level of usage:

Formal	Informal	Popular
comprehend	understand	get it
intoxicated	drunk	wasted
exhausted	tired	bagged
dejected	sad	bumped

A major problem with popular English is that its vocabulary is either too limited or too specialised (not all professors are up to date with the latest slang, and the slang used by one group may be scorned by another). Slang also changes rapidly. The third column in this list will look rather dated in a few years (if it isn't already), while the words in the first two columns have been around since Shakespeare.

The student must always be aware of what kind of work she or he is doing. The style must be appropriate to the subject, the situation and the intended audience. These issues are also important when you decide on your [audience](#) or when your professor lowers your grade for using [colloquial language](#)

[Take a quiz on formal English](#)

All of the following sentences are acceptable standard English, but some of them would not be appropriate in more formal writing. See if you can identify which sentences would not be acceptable in a more formal context and tell why.

1. Who should I send this to?
2. Whom should I send this to?
3. Gear this for the audience it is intended for.
4. He began to really try hard.
5. He began to slowly realize what had happened.
6. He's usually easy going. But before his first cup of coffee, he's a bear.
7. This department is going to work together as a team. And don't you forget it!
8. Are you sure it's finished? Checked every detail?
9. I needed the money for a couple of important things. Like paying the rent and buying groceries.
10. We're going to have a big bash, and you're invited.
11. The Smiths request the pleasure of your company at a banquet to be held in the honor of their son Josiah, who will be graduating from Andover College.

[answers](#)

The first three sentences all end with prepositions.

The first sentence should use "whom" rather than "who" since it is the object of a preposition.

(To whom should I send this?)

Sentences four

and five have split infinitives. (Horrors!) That is, they put an adverb between "to" and the rest of the infinitive.

Numbers six and seven contain sentences that start with conjunctions ("but" and "and").

Numbers eight and

nine contain sentence fragments.

In Number 10 "Bash" is too

slangy for a formal context.

The last sentence would be acceptable

in a formal situation, such as a formal invitation.