

Formal academic writing is quite different from informal spoken English. The differences can best be seen from a number of examples. In general, informal spoken English contains a number of colloquialisms (conversational expressions) that are inappropriate for formal written English. It is important not to mix the styles. Written academic English will **not** normally contain the following:

 **INCORRECT**

 **CORRECT**

Contractions
it didn't
they've

it did not
they have

Hesitation Fillers
er, um, well

Personal Pronouns
I think this is an effective plan.
You put the chemicals in the test tube.
We used two different methods of research.

This could be an effective plan.
The chemicals **are put** in the test tube.
There were two different methods of research.

Personal pronouns are sometimes used, but are often avoided by means of a modal verb (*could, might* etc.), an impersonal word such as *it* or *there*, or a verb in the passive voice.

Informal / Imprecise Words
lots of, nice, big, things, like

many, excellent, pleasant, large, reasons, problems, such as

Abbreviated Forms
it's, they're, e.g., i.e., etc.

it is, they are, for example, that is, and so on

A COMPARISON

Compare the following texts. The first is informal and spoken, the second formal and written (from a journal article).

Informal / Spoken	This guy, Hewson, right, he says that people that speak English, like native speakers, don't think about when to use words like 'the', they just do it.
Formal / Written	Hewson (1972, p. 132) has called the English article system a 'psychomechanism', through which native speakers use articles correctly but unconsciously. (Miller, JL 2005, 'Most of ESL students have trouble with the articles', <i>International Education Journal</i> , ERC2004 Special Issue, vol., 5, no. 5, pp. 80-88)

EXERCISE 1: The following sentences are mixed **formal** and **informal**.

Tick the correct box:

Informal **Formal**

a) The project will be completed next year.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
b) I showed that his arguments didn't hold water.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
c) I wonder why he put up with those terrible conditions for so long.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
d) Five more tests will be necessary before the experiment can be concluded.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
e) It is possible to consider the results from a different viewpoint.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
f) It has been proved that the arguments so far are without foundation.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
g) He'll have to do another five tests before he can stop the experiment.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
h) It is not clear why such terrible conditions were tolerated for so long.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
i) There are a number of reasons why the questionnaire should be revised.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
j) We'll finish the job next year.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

DEFINITE AND TENTATIVE WAYS OF WRITING

A feature of written academic English is the need to be careful (i.e. to show that you may not be certain about something). The purpose of this is to show that one is generalising or desires to be cautious, or even that one *might possibly* be wrong (though it is not *likely!*). (The three preceding words in italics are examples of such language in use.)

The most usual ways of expressing caution or lack of certainty are by means of verbs and adverbs.

Verbs: *appears to, seems to, tends to, may, might*

Adverbs: *perhaps, possibly, probably, apparently, likely*

This sentence is a **definite** statement:

Industrialisation is viewed as a superior way of life.

To make it more **tentative** or **cautious** we can change or add some words:

*Industrialisation **tends to** be viewed as a superior way of life.*

EXERCISE 2: Now look at the following sentences taken from an economics book.

- It is also likely to appear in the development of institutions.
- The ideal of economic development tends to be associated with different policy goals.
- Perhaps greater clarity can be brought to the meaning of economic development.

How would the above three sentences be written if we wanted to make them **definite** and not **tentative**?

(from Jordan, RR 1990, *Academic writing course*, 2nd edn, Collins ELT, London)

Exercise 2

- It also appears in the development of institutions.
- The ideal of economic development is associated with different policy goals.
- Greater clarity should be brought to the meaning of economic development.

Exercise 1

- Formal
- Informal
- Informal
- Formal
- Formal
- Formal
- Formal
- Informal
- Formal
- Formal
- Formal
- Informal

ANSWERS

STUDENT LEARNING CENTRE
REGISTRY BUILDING ANNEXE

TEL: 61-8-8201 2518
E-MAIL: slc@flinders.edu.au

INTERNET: <http://www.flinders.edu.au/SLC>
POSTAL: PO Box 2100, ADELAIDE, SA 5001