

Formal vs. Informal Language

The level of formality of any act of writing should be determined by the expectations of the audience and the purpose of the writer. Academic essays should be written for the academic audience, which includes both instructors and students. While the members of the academic audience tend to hold similar expectations, always check with your instructor for personal exceptions to this list of general guidelines!

When writing formal prose in essays intended for the academic audience:

1. Avoid Writing about Yourself/First Person Pronouns (in analytical essays)

Informal: **I believe** that Hawkeye's membership in the Avengers is vital to the success of the team.

Formal: Hawkeye's membership in the Avengers is vital to the success of the team.

2. Avoid Writing about Your Writing (in analytical essays)

Informal: **As mentioned in a previous paragraph**, the Muppets are not always the friendly neighbors they appear to be.

Formal: The Muppets are not always the friendly neighbors they appear to be.

3. Avoid Writing about the Author and Authorial Intentions (in analytical essays)

Informal: It is clear that **Flannery O'Connor** intends the climactic moment in which the escaped maniac kills the entire family to provide an example of cosmic irony.

Formal: The climactic moment in which the escaped maniac kills the entire family provides an example of cosmic irony.

4. Avoid Writing about Other Readers (in analytical essays)

Informal: When Sanger Rainsford appears from behind Count Zaroff's bedroom curtains, **the reader** is surprised.

Formal: Sanger Rainsford's appearance from behind Count Zaroff's bedroom curtains provides an element of surprise.

5. Avoid Second-Person Pronouns

Direct address of the reader

Informal: As **you** can see, the protagonist's death symbolizes nature's indifference to individual human lives.

Formal: The protagonist's death symbolizes nature's indifference to individual human lives.

Second person shift

Informal: Idris likes to play his Hüsker Dü CDs cranked so high that the wax flies out of **your** ears!

Formal: Idris likes to play his Hüsker Dü CDs cranked so high that the wax flies out of his ears!

Side note: Student writers often substitute “one” for “you” in an attempt to sound more formal. For clarity, use specific nouns instead of the pronoun “one.”

Before: When descending into the mouth of an active volcano, **one** should always remove matches from **one’s** pockets.

After: When descending into the mouth of an active volcano, spelunkers should always remove matches from their pockets.

6. Avoid Contractions

Informal: Despite using several strategies, Basil simply **can’t** remember his wife’s birth date.

Formal: Despite using several strategies, Basil simply cannot remember his wife’s birth date.

7. Avoid Jargon

Informal: The **DOD** assigned Llewellyn to a **TDY** as a **Chairborne Ranger**.

Formal: The Department of Defense assigned Llewellyn to a temporary position as an intelligence analyst.

8. Avoid Slang

Informal: **Dude got busted** for **taking down** a liquor store.

Formal: The man was arrested for robbing a liquor store.

9. Avoid Euphemisms

Informal: Rowena discovered that she was **knocked up** just hours after learning that her rich Uncle Mortimer had **kicked the bucket**, leaving her some **long green** in his will.

Formal: Rowena discovered that she was pregnant just hours after learning that her rich Uncle Mortimer had died, leaving her a great sum of money in his will.

10. Avoid Gender-Specific Language, including pronouns

Informal: Ewan worked as a **male nurse** while his twin sister, Sinead, became a successful **aviatrix**.

Formal: Ewan worked as a nurse while his twin sister, Sinead, became a successful pilot.

Pronoun/Antecedent Agreement Problem: Whenever a **student** succeeds in class, **they** should thank **their** teachers!

Sexist?: Whenever a student succeeds in class, **he** should buy a nice gift for **his** teacher.

Formal, but wordy: Whenever a student succeeds in class, **he or she** should buy a nice gift for **his or her** teacher.

Formal: Whenever students succeed in class, they should buy nice gifts for their teachers.

[Hint: Go Plural!]

11. Avoid Stereotypes and Biased Language

Informal: Tyrone Slothrop appears to be quite intelligent **for a blond**.

Formal: Tyrone Slothrop appears to be quite intelligent.

12. Avoid Clichés

Informal: After Ida received her speeding ticket, she knew she had to **face the music** and probably **pay the piper** in court, but when the judge laughed at her story, she knew he was just **rubbing salt in the wound**.

Formal: After Ida received her speeding ticket, she knew she had to accept responsibility and probably receive a punishment in court, but when the judge laughed at Ida’s story, she knew he was trying to make her feel even worse.