

# Formal Academic Writing

Writing is like talking; however, students should not address the academic community in the same way that they would talk to their friends. Writing in a formal academic setting can be a struggle. Here are some general guidelines for learning to write formally, which can help your grades and prepare you for the professional world.

## Do....

### ✓ Use Precise language and Effective Words

- Correct word usage: To achieve proper diction, you need to use the word that has the exact denotation (definition) AND connotation (the secondary meaning of a word that can carry associations or feelings) that you are intending to express. Always use a dictionary with the thesaurus!

**Ex.:** **firm**= steady (positive); **stubborn**=unreasonable (negative) (*A Writer's Reference* 151-65)

- Precise words: Another common mistake students make is using vague or informal words.

**Example:** It was really awesome just how creepy the characters in "A Rose for Emily" were.

**Revised:** Faulkner, through his use of tone and symbolism, creates mysterious and complex characters.

### ✓ Present others' arguments fairly and with an appropriate tone

When presenting a position or argument that you disagree with, be sure to describe this argument accurately, without loaded or biased language. You should "[r]ecognize opposing views, . . . state them fairly (if you don't, you do a disservice not only to the opposition but to your own position, because the perceptive reader will not take you seriously), and be temperate in arguing your own position" (*Current Issues & Enduring Questions* 181). Your tone should also be one that is authoritative. You should confidently state the strengths of your arguments using language that is neutral, not combative.

### ✓ Use Active Rather than Passive Voice

Writers should avoid passive voice because it is unclear who/what the actor is; if you are unsure about this, you should conduct further research in order to know more about your topic.

**Passive voice:** The law was passed in October 2007. (Who passed the law?)

**Active voice:** Mayor Jones passed the law in order to be re-elected in November.

### ✓ Say it, do not say that you will say it:

Do not tell the audience what you are going to do or say in the paper; just say it!

**Faulty:** In this paper, I will analyze the arguments against handgun control.

**Revised:** Arguments against handgun control are unconvincing because . . .

### ✓ Use concise language

Wordiness is often a sign that your thoughts need greater refinement; furthermore, wordiness can convey a pretentious tone or be confusing to the reader. See section W2 of *A Writer's Reference*.

**Wordy:** The reason why most people want to travel is that they want to experience other cultures.

**Concise:** Most people want to travel to experience other cultures.

# Don't Use....

## ✗ Contractions

Ex. You're → You are                      Can't → Cannot

## ✗ Personal Pronouns ("I, we, our, you")

Personal pronouns should normally not be used in your paper; third person puts distance between the audience and yourself, creating a more formal tone for the paper.

**Faulty:** I believe that capital punishment is wrong because . . .

**Revised:** Capital punishment is wrong because . . . (The audience will assume this is what you believe)

\*\*Note: For some 1301 or other class assignments, professors may allow or even ask you to use "I." In this scenario, feel free to do so; however, "you" should only be used when you are addressing the audience directly as in this handout. Ask yourself who you really mean. Replace "you" with "one," "people," or another specific label.

**Inappropriate:** In order to travel, you have to save hundreds of dollars for gasoline.

**Revised:** In order to travel, one has (or Americans have) to save hundreds of dollars for gasoline.

## ✗ Language that is Biased or Racially or Sexually Offensive

- Avoid the generic "he" by using "he or she"; if this becomes a burden, utilize the plural "they" instead.
- Avoid labels that (intentionally or not) disparage the person or group you refer to.
- Use names for racial, ethnic, and other groups that reflect the preferences of each group's members.
- Reference section W4-e of *A Writer's Reference* pages 177-80 to learn more language to avoid.

## ✗ Slang, Jargon, Clichés, and Conversational Language

These are often too imprecise and informal for communicating effectively to the audience; write EXACTLY what you mean. "Stuff" and "things" are common examples of vague language to revise.

**Slang/Conversational Language:** The story talks about a whole bunch of stuff that changes many things in the main character's life. (What "stuff"? What "things" change in the character's life?)

**Clichés:** Rebuilding New Orleans is easier said than done .

## ✗ Pretentious Language/Euphemisms

Words that are big, showy, or evasive should be replaced with more direct language. One form of pretentious writing is a euphemism, which is a presumably inoffensive word that a writer substitutes for a word deemed potentially offensive or too blunt (*A Writer's Reference* 173).

**Pretentious:** To perpetuate our endeavor of providing funds for our elderly citizens as we do at the present moment, we will face the exigency of enhanced contributions from all our citizens.

**Revised:** Citizens cannot continue to fund Social Security for the elderly unless we raise taxes.

## ✗ Ambiguous references

Be as specific as possible for the audience; in formal writing, students should avoid the phrase "in many ways" as well as "there is" and "it is" constructions.

**Faulty:** It is not fair that administrators make all decisions that affect students in many ways.

**Revised:** Administrators make all decisions for the school, affecting students' independence and finances.

**Ambiguous:** Parents and students waste time arguing. They should just give up some of their authority. (Who should give up their authority? Students or parents?)

**Revised:** Parents and students waste time arguing; parents should relinquish some authority.