



Graduate Online Writing Studio

Formal Academic Voice

Essays you write in college are considered formal documents. Just like you would not wear the same shorts and t-shirt you might wear at home to go to a formal event, you should not be using the same casual conversational language you use when talking with or texting your friends when writing a formal academic paper. Formal academic writing assignments require you to write in a formal academic voice. Here are three things you can do to dress up your writing!

1. Spell out your words rather than using abbreviations or contractions

Abbreviate is a fancy word for shorten. Therefore, abbreviations are shortened words. When talking, most people shorten words using abbreviations to save time. In formal writing, you want to spell out the words being abbreviated so that your reader knows exactly what you are saying. There are several different ways that a word can be abbreviated or shortened:

- **Contractions:** These are the most common type of abbreviation. Contractions are a way to combine two words into one by using an apostrophe to stand in for letters left out in the combination. Here are some examples of common contractions and how to spell them out:

can't = cannot	don't = do not	won't = will not
aren't = are not	isn't = is not	doesn't = does not
hasn't = has not	haven't = have not	wouldn't = would not
didn't = did not	couldn't = could not	should've = should have
that's = that is	what's = what is	there's = there is
they're = they are	he's = he is	she's = she is
they'll = they will	she'll = she will	let's = let us

- **Initialisms and Acronyms:** These both use the first letters of a group of words to create a shortened form of those words. The difference between an initialism and an acronym is that when we read an initialism, we read out every letter individually (e.g., FBI), but when we read an acronym, we read the letters as a new word (e.g., NASA). Here are some examples:

Initialisms

- USA = United States of America
- FBI = Federal Bureau of Investigation
- LGBTQ = Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer/Questioning
- CEO = Chief Executive Officer
- URL = Uniform Resource Locator
- TV = Television

Acronyms

- YOLO = you only live once
- BAE = before anyone else
- NASA = National Aeronautics and Space Administration
- AIDS = acquired immune deficiency syndrome
- GIF = graphics interchange format
- MADD = Mothers Against Drunk Driving

You can use widely recognized acronyms or initialisms in your paper, but you must spell out the full name of the acronym or initialism the first time you use it in the paper and then include the acronym either in the same sentence or in parentheses right after the spelled-out words like this:

The National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) launches rockets in Cape Canaveral.

- **Shortenings:** Shortenings are abbreviations where parts of the original word being shortened are left out. Some of these words are now treated as words on their own, and others are still read as a shortened form of the original word. These words should always be fully spelled out in your paper. Here are some common shortening examples:

ad = advertisement	app = application	Oct. = October	etc. = et cetera
flu = influenza	fan = fanatic	Mon. = Monday	vs. = versus
photo = photograph	phone = telephone	in. = inch	Ave. = avenue

2. Stay in objective third person rather than using first and second person pronouns

Pronouns are words that stand in for nouns in your sentence so that you do not have to keep saying the same noun over and over. If you want to use pronouns in an academic essay, they should almost always be in third person. Third person pronouns help your writing to sound more objective and formal because it takes you and your reader out of your writing while focusing on the topics and people actually involved in what you are writing about. The chart below lists the different personal pronouns:

	Singular	Plural
First Person	I, me, my, mine	we, us, our, ours
Second Person	you, your, yours	you, your, yours
Third Person	he, she, it, him, her, his, her, hers, its	they, them, their, theirs

There are problems associated with using first and second person pronouns in your writing:

- **First Person Pronouns:** I, me, my, mine, we, us, our, ours
These words are considered informal because they can make the author seem biased or not as objective as they would like to be. Often it is unnecessary to use first-person “I” unless you are including a personal anecdote, and if you decide to do that, you should check with your instructor to make sure they will allow it. The more common examples are using the plural forms of first person to discuss all people, called the editorial “we,” but it is often better to remove these uses of first person as they can be vague and confusing for the reader.

Here are some ways to remove unnecessary first person from your writing:

Informal: We learn best when **we** are allowed to learn from **our** mistakes.

Formal: **Students** learn best when **they** are allowed to learn from **their** mistakes.

Informal: In this paper, **I** will explore the following topics.

Formal: **This paper** will explore the following topics.

Informal: **Let’s (let us)** discuss alternatives to improve performance.

Formal: **Staff can** discuss alternatives to improve performance.

You should also avoid saying things like “I believe” or “I think” because as the author, everything that is not cited in the paper is assumed to be something you think or believe. Most of the time, the best way to get rid of these phrases is to just remove them from your sentence:

Informal: **I think** the author’s arguments are clear and logical.

Formal: The author’s arguments are clear and logical.

Informal: **In my opinion,** Jane should have taken a more proactive approach.

Formal: Jane should have taken a more proactive approach.

- **Second Person Pronouns:** you, your, yours

These words are considered informal because they directly address the reader, can cause confusion, and are not precise or accurate in most cases. Instead of using you to directly address the reader, you can use more specific nouns (people, readers, patients, etc.) or third person pronouns if you have already specified who they are referring to:

Informal: There is no way of knowing how **you** will react to the medication.

Formal: There is no way of knowing how **patients** will react to the medication.

Informal: **You** should always take well organized notes when **you** are in class.

Formal: **Students** should always take well organized notes when **they** are in class.

You should also avoid using command sentences because they imply that the subject of the sentence is the second person “you”:

Informal: (**You**) Check the weather before leaving.

Formal: Travelers should check the weather before leaving.

3. Don't use slang or words that are considered colloquial or conversational

While this may seem obvious, to sound more formal, you want to use more formal language rather than using slang or conversational English.

- **Slang or Colloquialisms** are informal expressions or nonstandard English used in everyday conversation and writing that are too familiar or conversational for formal writing. Since slang or colloquialisms are often regional or specific to a particular community and can evolve quickly, it is always best to use more precise and standard language in formal writing to ensure that the reader understands what you are writing about or referring to. Often these words can easily be replaced by more clear and descriptive language. Here are a few examples of how to revise common colloquialisms:

Informal: The doctor asked **dad** if he wanted to hold the baby.

Formal: The doctor asked **the father** if he wanted to hold the baby.

Informal: Five **kids** were interviewed about their experiences.

Formal: Five **children** were interviewed about their experiences.

Informal: The manager **wrote up** the employee for poor performance.

Formal: The manager **reported** the employee for poor performance.

Informal: The patient **got over** his illness.

Formal: The patient **recovered** from his illness.

Informal: Teachers still **count on** students to use correct grammar and punctuation in essays.

Formal: Teachers still **expect** students to use correct grammar and punctuation in essays.