

Writing style is how a writer expresses themselves. It includes **spelling, grammar and punctuation**, as well as aspects like **sentence length and word choice**.

Style may vary with the type or purpose of writing. For example, you may come across [academic writing](#), [journalistic writing](#) and [business writing](#), all of which have different purposes and characteristics.

However, all styles of writing can be described as either *formal* or *informal*.

Understanding Formal and Informal Styles

What do we mean by ‘formal’ and ‘informal’?

Informal language and writing, then, is suitable for use every day.

It is, effectively, how we speak and write to our friends and families. It will include slang and colloquialisms (defined as phrases that are used in informal but not formal language). The recipient may tolerate some spelling and grammar mistakes.

We are therefore likely to use an informal writing style when composing [emails](#) and letters to friends and family. Blogs and other online copy are also often written in a more informal, conversational style.

Formal writing needs much more care.

It is the style of writing used for business and other official purposes. It needs to be correct in terms of grammar, spelling, punctuation and usage.

A more formal style may also be appropriate for some letters, for example, if you are [making a complaint](#) to an organisation.

Characteristics of Formal and Informal Writing

When you look at a piece of writing, it is possible to distinguish whether it is written in a formal or informal style from several different aspects.

The main characteristics of an informal writing style are:

- **Colloquial language and terms.** Informal writing is similar to a spoken conversation. It may therefore include slang, figures of speech
- **A personal tone as if you were speaking directly to your audience (readers).** Informal writing is often very conversational in style. The writer often uses the first person (I and we), and will also address the reader directly using the second person (you and your).
- **A simple structure and approach.** As in conversation, both sentences and paragraphs tend to be shorter in informal writing. This is especially true in writing for the internet. Writers may also use incomplete sentences or ellipses (...) to make points.

- **Contractions and abbreviations within the text.** Just as in speech, words may be shortened or abbreviated in informal writing. You will therefore see contractions (for example, I'm, doesn't, couldn't, it's) and abbreviations (e.g. TV, photos) used much more in this form of writing.
- **Empathy and emotion.** In informal writing, a writer will often show more empathy towards the reader. They may, for example, explain a more complex thought more clearly. This is linked to the more personal style in informal writing, which is more suited to conveying emotions.

The main characteristics of a formal writing style are:

- **A more complex structure.** Formal writing often uses longer sentences. However, this is changing slightly with a growing understanding that clarity is important. In formal writing, you will also see a more structured approach generally, with points clearly introduced, explained and concluded. Formal pieces of writing are often carefully planned, revised and reviewed several times to ensure that they are as clear as possible, and make all the necessary points.
 - **An objective approach.** In formal writing, the writer uses a more objective approach. Main points are usually stated and then supported with arguments. Formal writing is less likely to be emotional in style. It therefore avoids emotive punctuation such as exclamation points or ellipsis, unless they are being cited from another source.
 - **Use of full words rather than contractions.** As a general rule, no contractions should be used to simplify words in formal writing. Abbreviations should generally be spelt out in full when first used. There are a few exceptions to this rule, for example, when the acronym is better known than the full name (BBC, ITV or NATO for example) or where it has become part of the language (for example, AIDS).
 - **Writing in the third person.** Formal writing is not a personal writing style. The writer often aims to sound dispassionate about the topic. It is usually not appropriate to use the first person (I or we) or second person (you). However, there are some exceptions to this (see box).

When to Use Formal and Informal Writing

A formal writing style is not necessarily “better” or “worse” than an informal approach.

There is a time and a place for both. They have very different purposes. You should therefore take care to choose the most appropriate style to use. There are several factors that may affect your choice.

Two of the key factors dictating the choice of a formal or informal writing style are your audience and your medium.

You may therefore find it helpful to read our pages [Know your Audience](#) and [Know Your Medium](#).

In general, writing for professional or work purposes is likely to require a formal style. However, you may be able to use a more informal style if you are writing to someone you know in person.