



# **FORMAL WRITING**



## UNDERSTANDING THE FEATURES OF FORMAL WRITING

Writing especially formal writing is very different from speech or spoken language. Written language is a distinct category of a language and is expected to follow the grammatical rules of a language religiously.

Formal writing is used in academics, business and professional document, research and other formal documents. Formal writing has certain characteristic features that must be followed strictly. The key features of formal language are explained below.

1. **Well-Planned:** Formal writing, in fact, writing in general is well-planned and not spontaneous like regular conversations. Planning a written document requires one to follow the writing process. The written message is planned, composed, revised, and edited before it reaches the audience.
2. **Syntactic Complexity:** Writing uses well-formed and more refined sentences. Connectors and conjunctions play an integral part in creating meaningful and clear sentences and paragraphs. Sentences can be longer, but more compact as writing is not repetitive and redundant like informal speech.
3. **Standard Grammar:** Writing follows grammar rules strictly. Any grammar mistake can confuse a reader or lead to misunderstandings. Prepositions, tenses, articles, passive, etc. must be used correctly as writers are not present with the reader to explain a message in case of grammar mistakes.
4. **Formal Vocabulary:** Formal writing uses formal and more dignified vocabulary. It avoids idioms and phrasal verbs and uses multisyllabic, Latinate vocabulary.
5. **Well-Organized:** The content of the written message must be well-structured and organized. Information & ideas are divided into well- formed sentences & paragraphs. In addition, the format of a given written document such as a letter, essay, etc. must also be followed properly for clarity and ease of the reader.
6. **Use of Punctuations:** Speakers use their voices (pitch, rhythm, stress), pauses, intonation and their bodies to communicate their message. Writers rely on the words and punctuations on the page to express meaning and their ideas. Punctuation marks, underlining, capitals, and connectors can be used to represent pauses, emphasis, tone, etc.
7. **Delayed Feedback:** Speaking allows for immediate feedback in the form of verbal (questions, comments, grunts) and non- verbal tools (facial expressions, body language). However, in the case of writing, the feedback is usually delayed. Writer may have to anticipate the reader's feedback and incorporate it into the text. Since, the writers have a delayed response from audiences or none at all and have only one opportunity to convey their message, writing should be interesting, informative, accurate and hold their reader's attention.
8. **No Short Forms:** Formal writing avoids abbreviations and short forms. It uses formal and well-known acronyms or abbreviation usually after using the full form first and then informing the reader that the writer will use the short form in the future. However, informal abbreviations must be avoided. In addition, formal writing never uses contractions which are common in speaking. Do not contract the auxiliaries and the negation word "not".

9. **Impersonal Language:** Formal writing is objective and hence uses impersonal language, that is, it avoids the use of personal pronouns such as “I”, “we” and even “you”. Passive voice and the third person point of view are used to be impersonal. Noun phrases can be used as subjects to avoid the use of personal pronouns.
10. **Learnt Craft:** Formal writing is a learnt skill and essential for both academic and professional success.

There are other more advanced features of academic and technical writing which will be discussed in future courses.

### **EXERCISE:**

Given below are a sample of speech and a sample of writing. Both the samples are about the same topic. Read them carefully, and find out the differences between them. Notice how Peter’s language and style undergoes dramatic change when he informs Bob about the termination of his services in written form.

## **SPOKEN TEXT**

**A dialogue between Peter Auer (the boss) and Bob Watson (an employee).**

**Peter:** Bob, I hate to break the news, but our sales were down again last month.

**Bob:** Down again, Peter?

**Peter:** Yeah. These days, everybody’s shopping at our competition, Honest Abe’s Furniture Store.

**Bob:** Ah...That’s bad, but everything in there costs an arm and a leg!

**Peter:** That’s true. They do charge...Well, forget it. We are about to go bankrupt. That’s what’s important.

**Bob:** I’m sorry to hear that. I thought my new advertising campaign would save the day.

**Peter:** Let’s face it. Your advertising campaign was a real flop. So, you’re fired. We need a real professional here.

## **WRITTEN TEXT**

**Peter Auer’s letter to Bob Watson.**

Dear Bob Watson,

I am extremely sorry to inform you that your services have been terminated owing to the devastating failure of the advertising campaign under your supervision.

To be able to compete with the rival store, you were assigned the duty to start a new advertising campaign to increase the sales. However, the new campaign did not in any way proved to be successful in achieving the objectives. The store requires a more competent and professional manager which would naturally need the termination of your services.

We hope you will understand that the hereby taken action is solely for the betterment of the store. We wish you good luck for your future endeavours.

When reading or listening to things, keep the distinction between speech and writing in mind. Study spoken language and written language as different varieties of a language. Avoid using the written style when speaking and vice versa.

**Exercise 1: The following sentences use personal pronouns. Re-write them by making them impersonal.**

1. We should invest more money in education.

2. If we banned the use of petrol as a fuel for cars, and we encouraged people to buy electric cars, this would help protect the environment.
3. I cannot understand why this decision was taken.
4. We expect the train strike will begin tomorrow
5. My experiment proves the hypothesis.
6. I think that the minister will resign.
7. I suggest that the new model must be tried.
8. We remember thing hear in our sleep.
9. We should learn more languages as it improves our decision making skills.

**Exercise 2: Re-write the sentences using full forms of informal contractions/abbreviations.**

1. He can't guarantee that the defendant will appear because the defendant hasn't called him in several days.
2. It's a long way from Tipperary.
3. They're coming into town tomorrow.
4. The outcomes of the study haven't been documented yet.
5. I discovered that I **didn't** tremble anymore when I had to speak publicly.
6. The character isn't aware that he's surrounded by people he can't trust.
7. Two-thirds of the eighth grade students can't read at grade level.

**Exercise 3: Identify the informal expressions in the following sentences. Rewrite the following sentences, replacing the informal expressions with a more formal equivalent.**

1. With women especially, there is a lot of social pressure to conform to a certain social norms.
2. Modern houses have so many labour-saving things that it is difficult for the person at home to have adequate exercise by doing chores, cooking, and looking after a family.
3. Simply making the effort to reclaim this wasted stuff for fertilizer would have a positive effect on greenhouse releases.
4. It is difficult to imagine exactly what is meant by saying that such a classification is natural as any collection of things could be classified in this way.
5. Unfortunately, since there are so many possible explanations, the correct one is most difficult to find out.
6. These exercises can easily be incorporated into an exercise routine, with each exercise done again a number of times.

**Exercise 4: Avoiding two word verbs- Phrasal verbs**

There is often a choice in English between a two word verb and a single verb - bring up/raise, set up/establish. Rewrite the following sentences, replacing the *informal two-word verb* with a more formal equivalent.

1. A primary education system was *set up* throughout Ireland as early as 1831.

2. This will *cut down* the amount of drug required and so the cost of treatment.
3. The material amenities of life have *gone up* in Western society.
4. The press reflected the living culture of the people; it could influence opinion and reinforce existing attitudes but it did not *come up with* new forms of entertainment.
5. Thus, he should have *looked into* how the patient has coped previously.
6. The aggregate of outstanding balances *went up and down* quite violently.
7. In 1947 the Treasury *brought up* the question of excluding South Africa (and India) from the sterling area.
8. Dieters often feel that they should totally *get rid of* high-fat and high-sugar foods.
9. Thus when a Gallic bishop in 576 converted the local Jewish community to Christianity, those who *turned down* baptism were expelled from the city.
10. Ms Tucker, Lord White's 29-year-old companion, has since *taken* her statement *back*.
11. Discussion of the outcome of experiments that have used this method will be *put off* until Chapter 7.
12. They did not easily accept or *put up with* differences in others.
13. My high-school friend signed up for three years with the army so he could *put away* enough money to go to university and study law.
14. The solitary feeding of insectivores in forests was therefore *put down* to a foraging strategy involving the pursuit of cryptic and easily disturbed prey by singletons.
15. In style, the turn toward abstraction and simplification *came about* earliest with Anquetin and Bernard and next with van Gogh.
16. For Klein that cloudless day never arrived, but he never *gave up* his hope for a just world.
17. The English liked coal fires even though they do not always *give off* much heat.
18. The story told by German propaganda, however, *gave away* nothing of the mounting hopelessness of the 6th Army's position.
19. These exercises can easily be incorporated into an exercise routine, with each *done again* a number of times.
20. Marx took as one of his main tasks the understanding of how this system came into being and this was in order to *find out* why this system had such power.
21. This was before he had read the guidelines on how to *carry out* the research.

**Exercise 5: Read the text and rewrite it in a more academic style:**

**Education**

*Lots of times in many years, different professional people who were interested in making education better have asked me what we know about how people learn so we can use it to make education better.*

**Exercise 6: Supply a more suitable academic word/phrase for the italicised parts of the following sentences:**

1. The reaction of the Managing Director was *sort of* negative.
2. The economic outlook for the business is *pretty bad*.
3. The future of funding is *up in the air*.
4. Britain's major car manufacturers are planning to *team up* on the research needed for more fuel-efficient cars.
5. It is imperative to concentrate in meetings so as to *catch* the important issues.

**Exercise 7:**

**In pairs, discuss how the following could be replaced in academic writing to create formal grammar and register. Provide an example for each to illustrate your point.**

[i] contractions:

[ii] negative forms using 'not':

[iii] etc.; and so forth/on

[iv] use of second person pronoun:

[v] direct questions (to address the reader):

[vi] positioning of adverbs within a sentence:

**Exercise 8:**

**Reduce the informality of each of the following sentences by bearing in mind the points discussed in Exercise 7.**

1. If you fail the psychometric test, you won't be employed by the company.
2. Ok, what are the causes of low employee morale? Many possibilities exist.
3. You can clearly see the differences between these two processes.
4. A small bit of ammonium peroxide is added to the solution gradually.
5. These special tax laws have been approved in some counties in the U.K.: Cumbria, Dorset, Devon, West Midlands, East Anglia, etc.
6. The subjects didn't have much difficulty with the task.

**Exercise 9: The following sentences are all informal. Rewrite them in formal academic register:**

1. She said it wasn't good enough.
2. I thought the lecture was terribly difficult to follow.

3. The results were a lot better than I expected.
4. None of the other students knew the answer either.
5. He said, 'It's hell writing your dissertation!'

**Exercise 10: Rewrite the sentences in a more academic style using verbs from the list below. Note that you may need to change the verb tense.**

*investigate   assist   raise   discover   establish   increase   eliminate*

1. Systems analysts can **help out** managers in many different ways.
2. This program was **set up** to improve access to medical care.
3. Medical research expenditure has **gone up** to nearly \$350 million.
4. Researchers have **found out** that this drug has serious side effects.
5. Exercise alone will not **get rid of** medical problems related to blood pressure.
6. Researchers have been **looking into** this problem for 15 years now.
7. This issue was **brought up** during the coroner's inquest

**Exercise 11: Rewrite the following sentences in a more formal style:**

1. In the following section, we will introduce the potential consequences.
2. I am trying to cut down on sugar this month.
3. You can increase productivity by taking regular breaks.
4. The summer camp offers many outdoor activities for kids: fishing, hiking, canoeing, etc.
5. It's hard to believe a person would turn down a trip to the Paris.
6. I have a lot of stuff to do this week.
7. Sugar prices have gone up drastically in the past few days.
8. She looks forward to having a chat with you soon.
9. No one in history has ever been able to look into the past the way it is happening now.
10. They don't have to go unnecessarily unless they have an emergency.
11. Most of the contestants were warming up for the race.
12. You won't get the flu if you take an umbrella in the rain.
13. He is sorting out the problem with the computer.
14. The traffic cop is checking the suspect' ID.
15. Lady Gaga called off the concert.
16. I'm sorry to inform you that your application didn't make to the final round.
17. I look forward to having a chat with you about this soon.
18. We'll tell you how you got on in the test in a couple of weeks.
19. If you're not happy with the service in the restaurant you can talk to the manager.
20. You don't have to buy anything If you don't want to.
21. It doesn't matter what the situation is, you should always wear protective glasses.

**Additional Reading:**

[http://facultyweb.ivcc.edu/rrambo/tip\\_formal\\_writing\\_voice.htm](http://facultyweb.ivcc.edu/rrambo/tip_formal_writing_voice.htm)

<https://www.niu.edu/writingtutorial/style/formal-and-informal-style.shtml>