



The How-to Manual That **You** Can Edit

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How to Avoid Colloquial (Informal) Writing ★

While it may be acceptable in friendly e-mail or in chat rooms, excessive colloquialism can diminish the quality of a formal written text. Presentation may be improved by applying the following techniques:

Steps

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- 1. Understand the difference between formal and informal English.** Informal English involves writing as if you were in conversation, but this may lead to grammatical error. Speaking informally may result with a listener feeling more comfortable, but writing informally may result with a reader thinking less of you. One style may be more easily attained, but it is important to determine the use and effectiveness of each style.
- 2. Understand basic English punctuation.** In fact, you should follow this rule in all of your writing (although it is particularly important in formal English). Punctuating your writing as you go along can reduce your risk of leaving out punctuation marks. In a formal letter, you use a colon, not a comma, as in "Dear John:"
- 3. Realize that some punctuation is not acceptable in extremely formal English.** The dash, the parenthesis, and the exclamation mark are not universally acceptable. In the most formal English, you should use the exclamation mark only when a character screams, "Fire!" or "Help!" You should avoid the parenthesis and the dash at all times in this style unless you quote an author who used them first. You should avoid the parenthesis and the dash in discourse that you transcribe yourself. Try to replace your dashes with colons in formal writing.
- 4. Avoid using common colloquial words and expressions,** as listed below. Again, these are words that, while acceptable in speech, should not be used in formal writing. Colloquial words and phrases are called "colloquialisms." There are also solecisms, such as "ain't," which are grammatical errors. Finally, there are nonwords, combinations of letters and characters that do not form real words, such as "alot." If you are in doubt about a certain word, look it up in the dictionary. If the dictionary makes no comment about it, but it sounds informal to you, consult another dictionary. A dictionary will label an incorrect word such as "ain't" as "Nonstandard" and informal word as "informal," "colloquial," or "slang." Some dictionaries also include phrases. For example, when you look up "to put up with" ("to tolerate") in the dictionary, you will see that it is informal.
- 5. "Omit needless words."** Some adverbs and phrases significantly reduce the formality of your writing while adding little to it. A good phrase to delete is "you know." This phrase implies that you know what the reader knows or is thinking while reading your paper; you do not have this power. Some adverbs, such as "well" starting a sentence, often are needless. Starting a sentence with "well" can be useful in everyday writing as a way to contrast the sentence with what came before. Many writers, however, use "well" too often.
- 6. Avoid contractions.** Contractions dramatically reduce the formality of your composition. Depending on how formal you need to be, you may want to avoid all contractions or use fewer contractions in your

writing than you would use in your speech. "Cannot" is preferable to "can't" in formal contexts. Some contractions such as "o'clock" (for "of the clock") are so commonplace that they are condemned in only the most formal writing.

7. **Try to avoid the first and second person.** Formal writing often tries to be objective, and the pronouns "I" and "you" tend to imply subjectivity. Phrases such as "I think that" can be deleted from a sentence when it is obvious that this is the author's opinion. Using the pronoun "I" is almost always acceptable in personal writing, and the pronoun "you" is almost always acceptable in letters and how-to's. In the most formal writing, "we" replaces "I," and "one" replaces "you." "One" also may be useful when you have a statement that does not apply to all of your readers. Finally, "one" can be useful in a letter when you have a statement that applies not to the reader but to people in general.
8. **Do not hesitate to split an infinitive even in the most formal writing when it is warranted.** See [How to Learn Perfect English As a Native English Speaker](#), Tip One for a thorough explanation. Split infinitives actually make writing more like Latin, not less so. A nineteenth-century Latin grammar book, Gildersleeve's Latin Grammar, said that the Romans tended to put their adverbs right next to their verbs, and adverbs usually preceded verbs. "To better understand ecology studies" is more like Latin than "to understand ecology studies better," in which the adverb is separated from the verb by two words. "To boldly go" is more like Latin than "to go boldly." Oxford dictionary says that "boldly to go" is more formal than "to go boldly;" that is most likely because of the Latin word order.^[1] The effectiveness of the split infinitive arises from the fact that "to" and the verb are like a single unit. After all, "to go" would be translated into Latin as a single word: "ire." For emphasis, an artist places a large picture between two smaller pictures.
9. **Do not be afraid to separate the auxiliary (helping) verb and the main verb.** See [How to Learn Perfect English As a Native English Speaker](#), tip two for a thorough explanation.
10. **Know when to end a sentence with a preposition (even in the most formal of English).** See [How to Learn Perfect English As a Native English Speaker](#), tip three for a thorough explanation.
11. **Always include the relative pronoun.** In speech and casual writing, you can say, "That was the boy I saw on the street" and make yourself clear. In formal writing, you should say, "He was the boy whom I saw on the street." In this style, you should be sure to always include "whom" even when it is not necessary to your meaning. Also consider this example: "There were five students who were complaining about the homework." If the relative pronoun is omitted, "complaining" becomes a kind of postpositive adjective, and the sentence is written completely in the neuter voice, with "were" as the only real verb.
12. **Do not start a sentence with a coordinating conjunction.** In the written language, do not use coordinating conjunctions such as "and" or "but" to start a sentence. In formal English, try to start sentence with "additionally," (or "moreover") "nevertheless," and "alternatively." In casual writing, you can start sentences with "also," but avoid this in formal English unless the word "also" is modifying a verb (usually in the imperative mood): "Also read Chapters Two and Three." Coordinating conjunctions are meant to join words and phrases, so a coordinating conjunction is left dangling without a role to play when a sentence begins with a coordinating conjunction. Simply attach the sentence that starts with a coordinating conjunction to the previous sentence; this produces a compound sentence. You also may use "additionally," "also," "either," "though," and "however" instead of starting with "and" and "but." You should tuck the words "also" and "however" in your sentence, not using them to start a sentence. "Though," coming at the very end of your sentence, can prove a painless alternative to starting your sentence with "but": "The passive voice can make your writing more formal. It can cause you problems, though."
13. **Develop short, choppy sentences into longer, more graceful sentences.** Formal writing generally uses longer sentences than casual writing. To make your writing more formal, try using more compound and complex sentences. Try to develop two simple sentences into one compound or complex sentence. Long sentences add variety to your writing. A long sentence can be particularly effective when it is paired with a short sentence; the contrast grabs the readers' attention. As the last sentence shows, you also can use a semicolon to join two simple sentences, provided that they are closely related to each other.
14. **Avoid clichés.** Clichés are sayings or expressions. Clichés make your writing informal and sometimes

humorous. They often make your writing unoriginal, but sometimes, you can use them to make an original play-on-words. Here are some clichés to avoid in formal writing:

- Hercules was *as strong as an ox*.
- I have to give *an arm and a leg* to find a parking spot during the holiday season.
- It was *as pretty as a picture*.

15. **Avoid stage directions.** Do not commence a letter by telling the recipient what you plan to do in the letter or begin an essay by telling the reader what the paper will discuss.
- "I am writing to you to ask you to. . . ."
 - "This paper is going to talk about how. . . ."
16. **Avoid vague words.** Vague words can be described as words that are open to interpretation or that do not express your ideas as well as more precise words would. "A few" or "enough" can often be replaced by a word that is more precise.

Common Colloquial Words & Expressions

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- A lot, alot – "A lot" is a colloquialism; "alot" is a nonword. After all, would you write, "Alittle"? "A lot" should be avoided in formal English and can be replaced by "many," "several," "numerous," "a large number," and "a large amount."
- Ain't – "Ain't" is always wrong. "Ain't" should not appear in the written language except in discourse.
- Alright, all right – "Alright" is a solecism; "all right" is a colloquialism. "Alright" should be avoided in the written language, and "all right" should be avoided in all formal language. "Okay" and "OK" are also very informal. Replace these words with "fine" or "acceptable" in formal English. When writing dialogue, be sure to write "all right," not "alright." There is one time when you must use "alright," and that is when you quote text from an author who made the mistake.
- Anyways – The proper word is "anyway." "Anyways" is always the incorrect variant and should be avoided in the written language.
- Anybody, anyone – "Anyone" and its variants are more formal than "anybody" and its variants. This is because the word "body" derives from German word "botah" whereas the word "one" derives from the Greek word "oíné," meaning "ace on a die." Both words do derive from Old English ("bodig" and "ān"), but their etymology can be traced much farther.
 - I didn't see anybody.
 - I saw no one.
- As – Avoid using "as" for "because" in formal English. Try replacing "as" with "for." Do not forget to use a comma before the coordinating conjunction "for," but leave the comma out if you use the subordinate conjunction "because."
- Big, large great – All three of these words are acceptable in formal English, but "large" is more formal than "big," and "great" is more formal than "large."
- Buy – "Buy" is not a colloquialism; it is a normal word . . . but it can often be replaced by something more formal. For variety, replace some of your uses of "buy" with "acquire" or "purchase."
- Contraption – Surprisingly, "contraption" is a colloquialism (although it is a long, Latin-derived word). Some

dictionaries mark it as such; others do not. In your formal writing, try to replace it with "device."

- Could of, would of, should of – The correct phrases are "could have," "would have," and "should have." "Could of" and the others should be avoided in all writing. In mimicking speech, use "could've," "would've," and "should've." You even can use "couldn't've," "wouldn't've," and "shouldn't've."
- Cute – The adjective "cute" is colloquial. In formal English, try to replace it with "adorable."
- Fire – Some uses of "fire" are colloquial. In formal English, say that you were dismissed, not fired. Also avoid using "fire" for "throw" when you try to write formally.
- Fellow – Avoid using "fellow" when you mean, "A person." Calling somebody a fellow is more formal than calling him or her a dude, but "fellow" is still a colloquialism.
- For sure – Replace "for sure" with "with certainty" in formal writing, as in "I know with certainty." You also may write, "I am positive" or "I am sure."
- Get, obtain – Sometimes, "get" is used for "obtain." In that case, you can use "find" or "grab" in formal writing and "obtain" or "procure" in extremely formal writing.
- Get, understand – Do not use "get" for "understand" unless the context is very informal. In the most formal writing, "understand" is replaced by "comprehend."
- Gonna, wanna – These are contractions of "going to" and "want to." They are unacceptable in all writing except in dialogue. If the speaker truly did say, "I'm gonna go to the supermarket," write it down that way.
- Got – "Got" is a colloquialism. Replace it with "have," as in "Do you have (not got) an extra pen?"
- How come – Replace "how come" with "why" in formal writing. In formal speech, you may find "how so" useful. If you find that you are about to use "how come," just use "how so."
 - How come you ordered steak?
 - Why did you order steak?
 - I don't know how come he ordered steak.
 - I don't know why he ordered steak.
- How do you do – Ironically, "How do you do?" is formal, and "a how-do-you-do" is informal.
- Humongous – The word is slang and is thus unacceptable in all levels of formality. Use "enormous" or "massive."
- Introduce, present – "Present" is more formal than "introduce." It is also more respectful to the person presented.
 - The queen was introduced. . . .
 - The queen was presented. . . .
- Kid – Whether a verb or noun, "kid" is not appropriate in formal writing. Replace "kid" with "child" or "joke."
 - I saw a kid on a skateboard.
 - I saw a child on a skateboard.
 - I'm kidding!
 - I am joking!
- Kinda, kind of, sorta, sort of – "Kinda" and "sorta" should not appear in the written language except in dialog. "Kind of" and "sort of" are unacceptable in formal writing when they are synonymous "somewhat" and "rather." "Kind of" and "sort of" are perfectly acceptable in all kinds of writing when they are used in a sentence such as

"The parakeet is a kind of bird."

- Let – When used in place of "allow" or "permit," "let" is a colloquialism.
- Like – In the written language, avoid using "like" for "as" or "such as." In casual writing, "like" may replace "as if," as in "It's like he never existed."
- Madam, Ma'am – Both "madam" and "ma'am" are very polite forms of address . . . but "ma'am" is unacceptable in formal English. In fact, "ma'am" is much more informal than other contractions such as "I'm" and "I'll."
- Most – In formal English, do not use "most" for "almost." You should write, "Almost everybody likes pizza," not "Most everybody likes pizza."
- On the other hand – "On the other hand" is a very common phrase, but should be avoided in extremely formal English. You sometimes will need to use "conversely" or "by contrast." "On the other hand" is particularly useful in everyday writing, though. Beginning a sentence with "on the other hand" can eliminate the temptation to start with "but."
- Pretty – The use of "pretty" as an adverb is not appropriate in formal writing. Replace it with "relatively," "fairly," or "quite." Sometimes, "pretty" should be deleted and not replaced; some of your sentences will be better with fewer adverbs.
- Real, really – Do not misuse "real" for "really." Remember that "real" is an adjective, and "really" is an adverb. Sometimes, it is best just to delete "real."
- Shall, will, should, would – You usually use "shall" in the first person and "will" in the second and third person. The only time you use "will" in the first person is when you hope really to emphasize a statement. For example, you would say, "I shall go to the grocery and buy some milk," but "I will retaliate!" The same is true for "should" and "would." In everyday writing, "I shall" or "I should" may sound pompous, so just contract them. Just use "I'll" or "I'd," and avoid "I won't" and "I wouldn't." You even can say, "I'll not do it" and "I'd not do that if I were you."
- So – Avoid using "so" as a synonym for "very" in extremely formal writing. In perfectly formal writing, you also should avoid using "so" as a coordinating conjunction. You can eliminate this colloquialism by deleting "so" and beginning the sentence with "because." Compare "The song may bother me, so I'll cover my ears" and "Because the song may bother me, I shall cover my ears." Sometimes, you need the conjunction "that" after "so," as in "I wrote this how-to so that you could improve your grammar and style."
- Thus, thusly – Usually, the words ending "-ly" are more formal. For example, "firstly" is more formal than "first." This is not the case for "thus," though; in formal writing, use "thus," not "thusly."
- Until, till, 'til – In everyday writing, use "until" or "till" depending on your preference. "Until" is preferred in formal writing. "'Til" is not a real word, to be avoided in all writing, including dialogue; use it only when you quote text from an author who used it.
- Use – Like "buy," "use" is a normal word, but can be replaced by something more formal. Try to replace some instances of "use" with "make use of," "employ," and "utilize." Remember that when "use" is a noun in your sentence, you replace it with "utilization."
- Use to – The proper form of this phrase, in writing, should be "used to." In speech, the "d" is sometimes silent, which makes for the confusion in writing.
 - "As a child, I use to go to nursery school."
 - "As a child, I used to go to nursery school."
- Whereas – "Whereas" can boost the formality of your writing! For variety, replace some of your uses of "while"

and "although" with "whereas."

- Formal writers should try to avoid colloquialisms whereas informal writers can use colloquialisms freely.
- **Yeah** – "Yeah" should be restricted to very informal writing. Replace "yeah" with "yes."
- **Yours truly** – Ironically, signing a letter "Yours truly" is formal, but referring to yourself as "yours truly" is informal. Still, "Sincerely" is a more formal signature than "Yours truly" because it avoids the second person. "Yours truly" can be very useful in informal English because the proper pronouns sometimes sound wrong. You can say, "It's yours truly!" instead of "It's me!" because "yours truly" can be used for "I" and "me."

Examples

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An informal letter:

John,

I'm looking for a job, and I've heard through the grapevine that you need a workhorse for your shop. Well, I'm the man of the hour, as I've got a lot to offer. I'm pretty hard-working, and I'm really good about being on time. I'm also used to working by myself. Anyway, tell me whether you want to get together for an interview, okay?

-Informal Joe

A formal, professional letter:

Dear John:

I understand that you are looking for a strong worker to assist you in your shop. I should appreciate consideration because I am diligent, punctual, and accustomed to working with minimal supervision. Please contact me if you are interested in setting up an interview. I thank you for your time.

Respectfully,

Professional Joe

Tips

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- Avoid most shortenings in formal writing. In formal English, you talk on the telephone, not the phone. You send photographs, not photos. You read information, not info. Some shortenings are almost universal, though. "Bra" and "cello" are used in almost all forms of writing, as opposed to "brassiere" and "violoncello", respectively.
- Know what acronyms may be used in your writing. In formal English, you should limit your use of acronyms, abbreviations making use of letters that stand for certain words. For example, "BM" is an acronym because it stands for "bowel movement." In formal English, you have a bowel movement, not a BM, or better yet, you defecate. "BM" may be appropriate for a humorous poem about constive, elderly people . . . but it is inappropriate in an essay about constipation. By contrast, DNA is used in almost all forms of writing, formal and informal. Few people are going to take the time to write, "Deoxyribonucleic acid." Some acronyms may be confusing and may not save you much time. For example, not everybody knows that "B.M.R." stands for "basal metabolic rate." Some acronyms such as "B.M.R." and "U.S.A." require periods between the letters.
- Write out the date in the most formal writing. For example, today is Monday, the eighteenth of June, two

thousand seven. Even in formal letters, you rarely need to write the date out in words. The most common way of writing the date is Monday, June 18, 2007.

- Use (grammatical) voice appropriately and effectively. You will usually use the active voice in everyday writing and frequently use the passive voice in formal writing^[2] You can greatly improve your writing by learning about the active voice and the passive voice. In the active voice, the subject performs the action; in the passive voice, the subject receives the action. For example, "I eat the cake" is in the active voice because the subject, I, is performing the action. By contrast, "The cake was eaten by me" is in the passive voice because the subject, the cake, is receiving the action. Realize that the passive voice is formed with "to be" and the past participle, as in "is formed." Thus, "I am running" is not passive because there is a present participle, and the sentence is in the progressive tense. It is incorrect to form the passive voice with "to get," as in "I got mugged," but the passive voice can sometimes be formed with "to become" ("to become balanced") or "to feel" ("to feel betrayed"). Although the passive voice makes writing more formal, teachers often disapprove of it because it uses more words. "I eat the cake" is four words long whereas "The cake is eaten by me" is six words long. Thus, it is advisable to reduce your use of the passive voice in your school papers.
 - Realize, however, that the passive voice is useful in avoiding subjectivity, and in those cases, the passive voice may seem a virtue to your teachers. The passive voice carries many other benefits as well; see, for example, "uses of the passive voice" in the American Heritage Book of English Usage^[3]. The article explains that placing an adverb in a passive-voice verb makes it more emphatic: "truly" in "I am truly convinced" becomes emphatic because of its position between "am" and "convinced." Also consider the strength in "It is strictly prohibited" and "You are cordially invited." The passive voice is also effective in emphasizing the agent, says the American Heritage Book of English Usage; with the passive voice, the agent can be placed at the end of the sentence (with a "by so-and-so" phrase) with a relative clause following (with "who" or "which"). In everyday writing, you should know what voice you are using and know why you are using it.

In the most formal of English, however, you are supposed to completely avoid the active voice. You can use what Robert Lowth and Lindley Murray identified as the neuter voice with verbs of being: "We were in New York for the summer" as opposed to "I spent my summer in New York." Infinitives and participles also will not make a sentence active. For instance, "It is time to quit" is not in the active voice because "to quit" modifies "time" as a kind of postpositive adverb. It would be like writing, "It is quitting time," in which "quitting" is clearly an adjective. This is why split infinitives are acceptable in even the most formal English, as in "We were forced to quickly clean our room." "To quickly clean" is an adverb modifying the passive verb "were forced."

- In formal English, you must avoid all uses of slang, words such as "cool" and "dude." The words that you use in e-mails and instant messaging probably will not be acceptable in formal English. You can practice with your friends! Try not to use slang while making your writing sound graceful and natural.
- Try to use just one powerful adjective instead of using an adjective and an adverb, and your writing will be stronger. For example, "very good" can be replaced by "excellent." "Very nice" becomes "delightful." "Very bad" becomes "terrible." Each of these words, "excellent," "delightful," and "terrible," is more formal than the equivalent combination of an adjective and an adverb. As a general guideline, try to avoid adverbs ending in "-y."
- Similarly, limit your use of absolute terms, such as "everybody," "always," "never." Unless you relay an indisputable fact ("Everybody needs water"), these words can make your writing imprecise or overly subjective. One may write, idiomatically, "I'll do anything for you," but one probably should write, "I'll do almost anything for you."
- Try not to think of proper writing as strictly "academic." It also makes you appear more intelligent. More importantly, it eliminates the bad habits that can lead to embarrassment in a college essay or a job résumé. Informal writing is generally inappropriate in science and law as well.
- Do not overthink it. For many of the steps above, the idea is avoidance, not total elimination. An occasional use of "very" or a vague word will not ruin your writing. Realize, too, that the familiar "A fun time was had by all" is a cliché, but it is perfectly formal! It avoids the active voice and the first and second person, making it appropriate for even the most formal writing. Finally, you must remember that these rules do not apply to

discourse; do not be afraid to write down what the person really said.

- **Expand your vocabulary!** Mastering new verbs can bring color to a paper by eliminating the need to employ the same words over and over again. Formal writing also tends to use more sophisticated words than casual writing. Formal writing is more likely to use words of Latin and Greek origin than words of German and Old English origin. For example, "frequently" is more formal than "often" because "frequently" is Latin-derived and "often" is Middle-English-derived. Using a single verb is more formal than using a verb and preposition. "Discuss" is more formal than "talk about." Remember, too, that some phrases such as "put up with" never should be used in formal writing.
- **Read!** Reading not only helps improve your vocabulary, but also helps you distinguish between formal and informal writing.
- **Use a thesaurus.** If you find that you are using a particular word too often, you may want to replace it with another term.

Warnings

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- Looking up words in the thesaurus greatly boosts the formality of your writing . . . but be sure that you use the words correctly and appropriately. Some words carry connotations that a thesaurus does not explain. For example, the California Prune Board changed its name to the California Dried Plum Board because the word "prune" carried a negative connotation about constipation. Consider, for instance, the connotation of "juvenile" and the connotation of synonyms.
- "You *can* get too much of a good thing!" As it was stated earlier, you must adjust your formality for your audience. Perfectly formal writing may be needed in some situations but ineffective in others. Formal writing that avoids the active voice may bore your audience because it does not focus on people's actions. Know that using the passive voice in school work may lower your grade! Realize, however, that most teachers allow you to use the passive voice when you truly need it. Just talk to your teachers about it if you are the kind of writer who really likes the passive. Be sure that your writing is appropriate for your audience, and always try to write something that readers will enjoy.

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Sources and Citations

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2. ↑ [Changingminds.org - Active and Passive Voice](#)
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- [A List of Common Clichés](#)
- [The Elements of Style - William Strunk, Jr.](#)
- [List of English Prepositions](#)

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