

Using Formal Language

In academic writing, we use formal language, avoiding the use of slang and colloquial language (casual and conversational language). Formal language gives the impression that your ideas are supported by research, analysis, and critical thinking.

Many casual phrases rely on vocal inflections or intend to convey meanings other than what the words literally indicate. For instance, we often speak informally of “hard facts,” “going the extra mile,” or someone “sticking to” a topic. Avoid such imprecise writing; whenever possible, the words you write should literally mean exactly what they say. If there were no miles involved, do not write of extra ones. Formal writing should be as clear to as many people as possible, and its meaning should not depend on the whims of your local dialect of English.

Tips:

- Use one-word verbs instead of verb phrases. For example, “investigate” is more formal than “take a look at.”
- Replace general verbs with more specific ones. For example, replace “got” with “received.”
- Replace extreme adjectives with less extreme ones. For example, replace “huge” with “large.”
- Replace words with apostrophes with words in full form. For example, replace “don’t,” with “do not.”
- Avoid “you” when speaking of people in general. Use the precise word for the person or people you mean.

Examples of informal language that students sometimes use:

tough guy attitude	has the hardest time
the buck stops with you	first off
a bit	this goes for me
freaks out	roller coaster of emotions
huge	an awesome [noun]
guys	slut
takes away	goes off on her
acting nuts	crack under pressure
lose on the hinges	go bad
messed with [his or her] head	whole thing is stupid
make it or break it	dealing with
get into it	goes on to say
give off a [adjective] vibe	throws me off
such a big deal	blew me away
hot (to refer to attractive person)	take [someone] over the edge
gives a clue, have any clue	have no idea
did a great job	