

Formal English: On some occasions it is important to adhere to the conventions that characterize serious public discourse and to avoid expressions that we might use in more casual situations. Formal writing and speaking are characterized by the tendency to give full treatment to all the elements that are required for grammatical sentences. Thus in formal English you might hear “May I suggest that we reexamine the problem?” where both clauses have a subject and verb and the subordinate clause is introduced by the conjunction *that*. Of course, formal English has many other features. Among these are the careful explanation of background information, complexity in sentence structure, explicit transitions between thoughts, and the use of certain words such as *may* that are reserved chiefly for creating a formal tone. Situations that normally require formal usage would include an article discussing a serious matter submitted to a respected journal, an official report by a group of researchers to a government body, a talk presented to a professional organization, and a letter of job application.

Source: *The American Heritage book of English usage: A practical and authoritative guide to contemporary English.* (2000) New York, NY: Bartleby.com.

Formal Discourse

- Creates a formal tone
- Stresses clarity
- Takes an objective position
- Shows a sophistication of sentence structure
- Uses an economy of words
- Uses appropriate transitions between thoughts

Some Conventions of Formal Discourse

- **No abbreviations** except accepted titles - Mr. Mrs.
 - ~ acronyms are permissible IF you have identified what the acronym stands for beforehand; i.e. NATO for North Atlantic Treaty Organization
 - ~ other acronyms should be avoided - use *United Nations* instead of the *UN*; use *United States* instead of *U.S.*
- **No contractions** - DO NOT USE don't, wouldn't, can't, won't, doesn't, etc.... (don't use *etc.* either) therefore *it's*, since it always means *it is*, should NEVER appear in your paper
- **Do not use first or second person**; no *I*, *we*, *our*, *you*, *your*, *us*, etc.
- **Avoid empty phrases** like “Due to the fact that...”; or “It seems as if...”; or “The thing is that ...”
- **Avoid using a sentence or clause when a phrase will do**
- **Use past tense** to present historical events
- **Do not refer to persons by their first names**; it is either *Mr. Washington*, *President Washington*, *General Washington*, or *Washington*, BUT NOT *George*

Some other hints:

- Do not use slang in your own composition, unless it is for a specific purpose, is used once to make a point, and it is placed in quotations so that your reader realizes you know that it is slang. When talking about Prohibition, for example, the correct term is *liquor* – not *booze*, and young people are *children* – not *kids*.

Some Conventions of Formal Discourse

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and some additional hints

- Be careful of your diction (word selection), and the connotations of words. Words have an emotional impact as well as an objective meaning. You should strive to avoid drama and allow your facts to speak for themselves. You should try to use objective words (especially watch the nouns and verbs) in your composition. Use your word processor's thesaurus feature to help you find just the right word – and maybe a new thought.
- Be aware of correct idiom usage. For example, you do not indicate that someone is **faced** with a problem. The person is **presented** with a problem that they must **face**.
- Be aware of the difference between *to, two, and too*, the difference between *their and there*, and when to use *weather and whether*. Use homophones correctly; incorrect usage is a significant grammatical mistake.
- Check for comma splices – always. This is the most common composition error made by students. If you have an independent clause followed by another independent clause, they cannot be connected with a comma. You must use a comma and a coordinating conjunction (like this sentence), or you must use a semicolon. [Sometimes a colon without the coordinating conjunction is also appropriate.]
- Don't neglect to use commas before the coordinating conjunction of a compound sentence but avoid sprinkling commas all over the place too. Notice that the sentence above does not have a comma before the coordinating conjunction *but* because it is not a compound sentence – only a compound verb.
- Check to see that you have not split any infinitives. This is probably the second most common error in student writing.
- Check subject-verb agreement. A singular subject demands a singular verb form. If in doubt, find the subject of your sentence and then find the verb. The verb form must match the subject in number. For example:

The reason that so many students are having difficulties with their papers (are, is) that they waited too long to start them.

The subject is reason; the verb must be is.

- Do not “argue contrary to fact.”
For example, you do not say

If the Japanese had not bombed Pearl Harbor, the United States would probably not have entered the war.

They DID bomb Pearl Harbor and arguing contrary to fact is pointless. State your idea in positive terms.

The bombing Pearl Harbor was the most significant event in drawing the United States into World War II.

If you avoid making these mistakes in your rough draft, you will not leave them in your final copy where it will cost you points. These are some of the common errors I remember from past experience. I will offer some additional hints after I have read your rough drafts and have seen what errors are most prevalent in your compositions.