

From the Rock Creek Writing Center

Formal and Informal Language

Just as one dresses differently when going to a movie with friends and when interviewing for a job, the tone of our language also changes depending on environment, audience, and purpose. When with friends, we usually use words and ideas that are shared by those friends, so we don't try to be very specific and explanatory; our friends already know what we are communicating. We also avoid technical or impressive language, and we may use slang. This is informal or casual language.

Contrarily, we strive for clarity and explanation when in an interview because we don't want to be misunderstood by the interviewer or accidentally confuse her through vague references. Furthermore, we make our language impressive by using larger, more complex words and avoiding everyday phrases and clichés. This is formal language.

To better understand formal and informal language, think of a spectrum between the kind of language used in an interview and the language used when with friends. Neither example is purely formal or informal because elements of both exist in almost all language. Compare again language and clothing:

suit and tie-----tennis shoes and jacket-----jeans and a t-shirt

<---formal-----semi-formal-----informal--->

specific language-----common phrases-----slang, profanity

Purely formal language is equivalent to royal robes and religious miters while purely informal language is boxer shorts and a lampshade. As we enter situations requiring more respect for the audience, greater clarity, and an impressive flourish, we adopt formal elements. Conversely, as we encounter audiences of friends and family, we drop formal elements and allow our language to loosen up and slip into a pair of comfortable jeans.

Using "I"

Professors and teachers are worried that if you use "I" it will lead to you telling the reader about what you did last night. In other words, using "I" can be a license for informal and vague writing. While a paragraph about one's personal experiences must use "I," a formal analytical or research essay may require emphasis on the research over your personal experiences.

When writing professional research reports and essays, one usually avoids using "I" in order to establish an objective tone. However, when writing a personal narrative, it's appropriate to use "I." It's a good idea to ask your instructor if the use of "I" is appropriate for your essay.

For review

Elements of Formal Language

- Stress upon clarity (explanatory)
- Impersonal references (3rd person perspective, avoiding “I”)
- Avoiding common phrases/clichés/slang
- Avoiding contractions
- Impressive wording (multiple syllables and jargon)

Elements of Informal Language

- Assumption of knowledge (presumptive)
- Personal references (1st and 2nd person perspectives)
- Use of common phrases/clichés/slang
- Use of contractions
- Conversational wording (few syllables and easy to pronounce)

Informal Language Exercise

Rewrite the following paragraph using informal language to better match the tone with the purpose of sending a birthday party invitation to a friend.

Given the imminent arrival of the author’s annual celebration of the anniversary of his birth, the recipient of this correspondence is requested to attend the aforementioned celebration at the venue listed upon the enclosed brochure. Festivities shall begin at one o’clock after the noon hour and include a luncheon of grilled Hamburg sandwiches with condiments and toppings available, a live recital by the much lauded musical “Flashfire,” and an open area for the express purpose of dancing. Guests are requested to bring their preferences of beverage and additional refreshments if desired.

Formal Language Exercise

Imagine that you are writing an academic essay about the film *Bambi*. Rewrite the following paragraph using formal language to explain the events that lead to the death of Bambi’s mother.

Bambi has these huge problems. We see that the hunters are the evil that sets the reality that the forest and fields aren’t safe for Bambi and his mom. In one scene Bambi’s mom was all like you better be careful in the fields, and Bambi goes OK and keeps eating the lawn. Later, Bambi’s mother gets it. Bambi hears bang! and tries to find her and he’s scared and stuff. Bambi sees his Dad and he goes she ain’t coming back. It’s like life is hard and then you die.

By Tim Treen and Andy Zboralski for the May 2011 Mighty Pen Presentations.