

Formality and Informality: Some Pointers

English has an amazing array of formal and informal tones. Just look at the following sentences:

1. "Depart from this domicile and desist all your illegal larceny." (Ultra-formal)
2. "Leave the premises and cease stealing my property." (Formal)
3. "Get out of my house and stop taking my belongings." (Informal)
4. "Get outta my crib and quit jacking my stuff." (Ultra-informal, slangy)

We can think of formality and informality not as a binary with two possibilities but as a sliding scale with varying degrees. The problem is that traditionally, the written word is more formal than the spoken word. Since most students form their verbal habits from daily speech rather than written speech, beginning writers have trouble maintaining a formal or informal tone in college papers.

Note that there's nothing inherently "bad" about informality. It all depends upon circumstances. If a male student was trying to woo a sweetheart, he might have better luck if he relaxed and said, "You know, I think I'm in love with you," than if he tried to be ultra-formal and told the young lass, "Dear madam, my cogitations suggest an inordinate affection on my part." There's a reason we have familiar, friendly language.

On the other hand, some statements or situations call for a certain gravity. Informality can come across as callous or rude. Writing an informal letter stating, "Yo Dude! It breaks me up to say your old lady kicked the bucket" is certainly less appropriate than "Dear Sir, I regret to inform you that your wife has died."

Some subjects (such as writing about one's childhood, or writing about a humorous topic) may be well suited to a relaxed, informal tone. Some subjects (such as writing a research paper, analyzing literature, making a grant proposal, or submitting a résumé) may demand more dignified words and formal expressions.

Make the following more formal:

1. She just wanted to say, "Hey y'all!"
2. That question is a no-brainer.
3. That's a cheesy t.v. with no color.
4. Chopping up frogs in biology grosses me out--like, gags me totally.
5. Dude, what's up with that?
6. That prof needs to chill out about kids using slang. We can't all talk like her.
7. Now girlfriend, don't you be dissing me!
8. That boy's such a grammar-geek.
9. Yo! That fella is a player, I'm telling you.
10. He seems a bit flaky to me. He oughta be in juvie.
11. That's the boss-man calling for ya, buddy.
12. Six bucks for that dress? What a rip off!
13. That rookie is hot stuff on the 'turf, man!

Make the following more informal:

1. One cannot condone such deceptive evasions in a prisoner's answers.
2. This vile medical concoction purportedly diminishes the required need for sleep.
3. That incorrigible ruffian suffers from kleptomaniacal impulses.
4. Dear Sir, I compose this letter in response to your previous solicitation via telephone.
5. Madam, one might consider three potential destinations for your Caribbean excursion.
6. Might one offer a beverage to the guests during this *soiree*?
7. His rich, silken vestments befit a king.
8. I suffer from interminable bouts of insomnia at irregular nocturnal hours

