FORMAL WRITING CHEAT SHEET

PURPOSE OF FORMAL WRITING

Professors expect academic papers to be written with a certain level of formality. However, formal writing goes beyond writing essays for classes. Businesses expect their employees to write professional emails, letters, and reports — all of which require a formal tone. Although not an exhaustive list, the rules listed below are a guide to help make your writing more formal.

CONTRACTIONS

While contractions are not grammatically incorrect, they are too conversational to be appropriate in formal writing.

**Examples**

**Informal:** Martin Luther didn’t agree with the Church on indulgences.

**Formal:** Martin Luther did not agree with the Church on indulgences.

SECOND PERSON

Because what you are saying almost never applies to the reader, the second person (“you,” “yours,” etc.) is never allowed in academic papers. Find a way to rephrase the sentence without saying “you.”

**Examples**

**Informal:** As a paramedic, you have to deal with many stressful medical emergencies.

**Formal:** Paramedics have to deal with many stressful medical emergencies.

CLICHÉS

There is nothing wrong with using cliché words or phrases, but because they are so common, the mind easily skips over them when reading. Clichés are also usually lazy and vague, and their meaning may be unclear to non-native English speakers. Try to find a non-cliché way to express the same thought so that you will not lose readers’ attention.

**Examples**

- a shot in the dark
- pushing the envelope
- an arm and a leg
- a perfect storm
- between a rock and a hard place
- down on his luck
- full of hot air
- hit the nail on the head
- in the nick of time
- in this day and age
- too good to be true
- at the end of the day
- avoid ___ like the plague
- think outside the box
- the best he could be
- cutting edge
SLANG/COLOQUIAL TERMS

Formal writing is standardized so that as many people as possible can understand what is being written. Unlike standardized English, however, slang and regional expressions are not familiar to everyone. Although slang is acceptable in conversation, it is inappropriate in formal writing.

EXAMPLES

- ASAP
- hit the road
- screw up
- snafu

TENSE CONSISTANCY

Be consistent with the verb tense you use within a paragraph and, more importantly, within a sentence.

EXAMPLES

- Incorrect: I was miserable at my part-time job. However, just when I thought I would have to quit, a new manager walks in and starts making a bunch of productive changes.

PASSIVE VOICE

When the action of a sentence happens to the subject instead of the subject doing the action, that sentence is in passive voice. While passive voice is sometimes appropriate, it is usually just a wordier way of saying what you mean. Passive voice should be avoided as often as possible.

EXAMPLES

- Passive: The Taming of the Shrew was read by the whole class.
- Active (preferred): The whole class read The Taming of the Shrew.

HOWEVER

- Passive: Every year, tens of thousands of people are killed on U.S. roads.
- In this case, the writer may not know the specific causes of death, or he or she may wish to emphasize the number of deaths instead of the causes.

ELLIPSES

Do not end a sentence with ellipses to indicate a pause or your thoughts trailing off. This is too informal.

EXAMPLES

- Incorrect: Daryll did not know what to do...
- Incorrect: Galileo was confused... his science had just been deemed heresy.

SPACING ISSUES

Wonky or unnecessary spacing looks unprofessional. This includes the extra space Word adds by default at the end of a paragraph. Turn off this setting to avoid adding unnecessary space.

If Word is adding extra space:

- In the “Paragraph” section of the toolbar, go to the “Line and Paragraph Spacing” button.
- Select the “Remove Space After Paragraph” option.

For specific questions not addressed in this handout, please visit the LETU Writing Center or email WritingCenter@letu.edu.