

formal / informal



One of the biggest misconceptions in academic writing has to do with the meanings of the words *formal* and *informal*. Many students enter (and leave) university with some version of these three basic ideas in their heads: 1. *Informal* writing is “stating things simply using everyday words”; 2. *Formal* writing is “using lots of big, fancy words and technically complex sentences”; and 3. *Academic* writing should be *formal*.

I believe these ideas are very, very misleading, and even dangerous (if miscommunication is dangerous, which I think it can be!) These wrong premises about formality and informality can lead to other beliefs which are completely absurd: for example, the idea that any one given word can be labeled *formal* or *informal*, or labeled *academic* or *non-academic*. For example, one of my colleagues recently told me that her supervisor ordered her to take the word “scary” out of her presentation abstract, because it’s “not an academic word.”

My experience has shown that such beliefs are especially harmful for English learners. My students often think because they are not able to express themselves in “big, fancy” words, the *perfect* words—they are not able to express themselves at all. That’s awful. But perhaps even worse is when a student turns in a paper full of what they think are “academic” words and phrases—and it’s totally incomprehensible, a train wreck of abstract nonsense. Then, when I sit down with that student, and ask them to please tell me out loud what they wanted to say in the paper, I understand them perfectly, because suddenly they are using clear and simple words. At this point I usually say “What you said to me out loud, just now—write that down. That’s where to start.” And for some of them this is a true revelation.

So let’s back up and start again, with some very basic premises.

First of all, we should consider the deeper meaning of the word *form*. Language itself *is* a form, and therefore all language is “formal.” Think about it—this is true on a “micro” level, since every letter—like my favorite letter, *S*—takes a particular shape or form, and also on a “macro” level, since every language has its own grammar and syntax, which are both obviously aspects of form. Every word you write or speak is technically “formal.” So the question is not whether your writing is formal or informal. The question is *which* form you want your language to take. And to answer this question, you always have to ask: what is the purpose (or what are the

purposes) of this act of writing, or speaking? The purpose will in-form your choice of vocabulary.

I know this is simplifying things quite a bit—but let's say for now that one main purpose of *academic* writing is to convey ideas (sometimes rather complex ideas) as *clearly*, as *specifically*, and as *accurately* as possible.

If we accept this premise as true, then when people criticize a piece of academic writing for being "too informal," how should we interpret that? What do they really mean? I would argue that that word "informal" is itself not specific or accurate enough in this case. So I think what these people really mean, and what they should really say, is, "This sentence is not *specific* enough; it's too vague, too general, it's open to too many other interpretations which are misleading." Or perhaps they could (and should) say, "This phrase doesn't accurately express the logical connection which you are trying to make." Or, in some cases, maybe what they mean to say is "This word probably won't be understood by your intended audience." These, I think, are much more helpful criticisms than "This word is too informal."

The hard truth is that it takes incredible skill, gained from lots of reading and writing experience, to be able to "hit" the proper register in a piece of writing (I'm going to define *proper register* as the overall nice feeling a reader gets when a writer has chosen the "right" words to address them in a particular situation). It may take you a while to master this skill. In the meantime, your priority should be communication. Use the words that will get your basic ideas across, even if they seem "un-academic" or "simple." Once you've done that, you can show your work to other writers, or other English learners, or English experts, and they can help you revise to make your writing more accurate, specific, and meaningful. But if you try too hard to be "academic" and use too many words which don't come naturally to you, you may end up producing garbage.

Maybe now you can see how these questions about formality relate to the concepts of showing and telling. If the goal of good writing is to SHOW your readers what you mean, then it stands to reason that you should use whatever words or phrases you think SHOW your ideas best—even if they are not typically "academic" words. One great example of this idea is the essay "Should Writer's Use They Own English?" by Vershawn Ashanti Young (<http://digital.lib.uiowa.edu/ijcs/ijcs1213-10.htm>). In this essay, which was published in a major academic journal, Young is responding to the critic Stanley Fish, who claims that students should be taught to use only "standard English" in the classroom, and to use their non-standard dialects or variants only at home or in the streets. In order to SHOW why Fish is wrong, Young writes his entire essay in "non-standard" English. Here's a quote from the essay:

In my own experience teachin grad students, they also tend to try too hard to sound academic, often using unnecessary convoluted language, using a big word where a lil one would do, and stuff. Give them students some credit, Fish! What you should tell them is there be more than one academic way to write rite. Didnt yo friend Professor Gerald Graff already school us on that in his book *Clueless in Academe* (2003)? He say he

tell his students to be bilingual. He say, say it in the technical way, the college-speak way, but also say it the way you say it to yo momma—in the same paper. Now that's some advice!

Can you understand Young's basic points here? In this case, does using language full of grammar "mistakes" and slang words prevent Young from getting his point across? Or does it actually... *help* him?