

How to Avoid Colloquial (Informal) Writing

While it may be acceptable in friendly e-mails and chat rooms, excessive colloquialism is a major pitfall that lowers the quality of formal written text. Here are some steps/tips that you can follow to help improve your overall writing. Reading this list and surveying your final copy of your EE before submission can earn you easy points on your EE:

Steps

1. **Understand what formal English is.** Realize that if you write the way you talk, you most likely will end up using informal English. You even may find yourself committing grammatical errors! Remember, too, that talking informally can make the listener feel more comfortable, but writing informally can make the readers think less of you. Know when to use informal English and when to use formal English, and discover which style comes more naturally to you.
2. **Understand basic English punctuation.** In fact, you should follow this rule in all of your writing (although it is particularly important in formal English). Punctuating your writing as you go along can reduce your risk of leaving out punctuation marks. In a formal letter, you use a colon, not a comma, as in "Dear John:"
3. **Realize that some punctuation is not acceptable in extremely formal English.** The dash, the parenthesis, and the exclamation mark are not universally acceptable. In the most formal English, you should use the exclamation mark only when a character screams, "Fire!" or "Help!" You should avoid the parenthesis and the dash at all times in this style unless you quote an author who used them first. You should avoid the parenthesis and the dash in discourse that you transcribe yourself. Try to replace your dashes with colons in formal writing.
4. **Avoid using common colloquial words and expressions.** Again, these are words that, while acceptable in speech, should not be used in formal writing. Colloquial words and phrases are called "colloquialisms." There are also solecisms, such as "ain't," which are grammatical errors. Finally, there are non-words, combinations of letters and characters that do not form real words, such as "alot." If you are in doubt about a certain word, look it up in the dictionary. If the dictionary makes no comment about it, but it sounds informal to you, consult another dictionary. A dictionary will label an incorrect word such as "ain't" as "nonstandard" and informal word as "informal," "colloquial," or "slang." Some dictionaries also include phrases. For example, when you look up "to put up with" ("to tolerate") in the dictionary, you will see that it is informal.
5. **"Omit needless words."** Some adverbs and phrases significantly reduce the formality of your writing while adding little to it. A good phrase to delete is "you know." This phrase implies that you know what the reader knows or is thinking while reading your paper; you do not have this power. Some adverbs, such as "well" starting a sentence, often are needless. Starting a sentence with "well" can be useful in everyday writing as a way to contrast the sentence with what came before. Many writers, however, use "well" too often.
6. **Avoid contractions.** Contractions dramatically reduce the formality of your composition. Depending on how formal you need to be, you may want to avoid all contractions or use fewer contractions in your writing than you would use in your speech. "Cannot" is preferable to "can't" in formal contexts. Some contractions such as "o'clock" (for "of the clock") are so commonplace that they are condemned in only the most formal writing.
7. **Try to avoid the first and second person.** Formal writing often tries to be objective, and the pronouns "I" and "you" tend to imply subjectivity. Phrases such as "I think that" can be deleted

from a sentence when it is obvious that this is the author's opinion. Using the pronoun "I" is almost always acceptable in personal writing, and the pronoun "you" is almost always acceptable in letters and how-to's. In the most formal writing, "we" replaces "I," and "one" replaces "you." "One" also may be useful when you have a statement that does not apply to all of your readers. Finally, "one" can be useful in a letter when you have a statement that applies not to the reader but to people in general.

8. **Know when to end a sentence with a preposition (even in the most formal of English).**
9. **Always include the relative pronoun.** In speech and casual writing, you can say, "That was the boy I saw on the street" and make yourself clear. In formal writing, you should say, "He was the boy whom I saw on the street." In this style, you should be sure to always include "whom" even when it is not necessary to your meaning. Also consider this example: "There were five students who were complaining about the homework." If the relative pronoun is omitted, "complaining" becomes a kind of postpositive adjective, and the sentence is written completely in the neuter voice, with "were" as the only real verb.
10. **Do not start a sentence with a coordinating conjunction.** In the written language, do not use coordinating conjunctions such as "and" or "but" to start a sentence. In formal English, try to start sentence with "additionally," (or "moreover") "nevertheless," and "alternatively." In casual writing, you can start sentences with "also," but avoid this in formal English unless the word "also" is modifying a verb (usually in the imperative mood): "Also read Chapters Two and Three." Coordinating conjunctions are meant to join words and phrases, so a coordinating conjunction is left dangling without a role to play when a sentence begins with a coordinating conjunction. Simply attach the sentence that starts with a coordinating conjunction to the previous sentence; this produces a compound sentence. You also may use "additionally," "also," "either," "though," and "however" instead of starting with "and" and "but." You should tuck the words "also" and "however" in your sentence, not using them to start a sentence. "Though," coming at the very end of your sentence, can prove a painless alternative to starting your sentence with "but": "The passive voice can make your writing more formal. It can cause you problems, though."
11. **Develop short, choppy sentences into longer, more graceful sentences.** Formal writing generally uses longer sentences than casual writing. To make your writing more formal, try using more compound and complex sentences. Try to develop two simple sentences into one compound or complex sentence. Long sentences add variety to your writing. A long sentence can be particularly effective when it is paired with a short sentence; the contrast grabs the readers' attention. As the last sentence shows, you also can use a semicolon to join two simple sentences, provided that they are closely related to each other.
12. **Avoid clichés.** Clichés are sayings or expressions. Clichés make your writing informal and sometimes humorous. They often make your writing unoriginal, but sometimes, you can use them to make an original play-on-words. Here are some clichés to avoid in formal writing:
 - Hercules was *as strong as an ox*.
 - I have to give *an arm and a leg* to find a parking spot during the holiday season.
 - To genetically engineer is to *play God*.
13. **Avoid stage directions.** Do not commence a letter by telling the recipient what you plan to do in the letter or begin an essay by telling the reader what the paper will discuss.
 - "I am writing to you to ask you to. . . ."
 - "This paper is going to talk about how. . . ."

14. **Avoid vague words.** Vague words can be described as words that are open to interpretation or that do not express your ideas as well as more precise words would. "A few" or "enough" can often be replaced by a word that is more precise.
15. Do not hesitate to split an infinitive when it is warranted. Grammarians, teachers, and writers used to try not to split "to" and the verb because the infinitive is one word in Latin (such as "ire" for "to go"). Now, however, grammar and writing authorities have realized that avoiding the split infinitive can make a sentence unclear. According to Oxford Dictionary compilers, the split infinitive can also make your writing stronger! "To boldly go" is stronger than "to go boldly" for the same reason that a big picture surrounded by two smaller pictures becomes particularly emphatic. "To boldly go" is also more formal, not less so, than "to go boldly" because the Romans were known to put their adverbs right next to their verbs. "Boldly to go" will work, but it sounds less natural, and putting the adverb in front of "to" does not always work.
(<http://www.askoxford.com/asktheexperts/faq/aboutgrammar/splitinfinitives>).
16. Thus, a rule that is supposed to Latinize the English language has made it less like Latin, especially considering that "to" is not part of the infinitive anyway. Consider these two sentences: 1) "Her plan is not to use the active voice" and 2) "Her plan is to not use the active voice." The first sentence translates into "It is not her plan to use the active voice" while the second sentence translates into "She is trying not to use the active voice." The split infinitive is absolutely necessary in this sentence, proving that this rule is imaginary! Also consider "to more than double": "Calcium has been shown to more than double fat excretion." "More than to double" is ungrammatical; it is just not English! The Oxford experts recommend against the use of the split infinitive in formal writing. This is not because the split infinitive is informal but because your audience will generally have "higher" standards.
17. Do not be afraid to use a "split verb phrase." Some writers who do not split infinitives refuse to split verb phrases as well, but there is no such rule. If there were such a rule, we should all be saying, "I saw her not" instead of "I didn't see her." We should also say, "You are going?" instead of "Are you going?" but "You are going?" is a Nonstandard question. The evolution of the English language proves that this rule is imaginary. In fact, your sentences will be stronger if you decide to completely ignore this rule, especially when you use the passive voice.
18. Realize that you sometimes have to end a sentence with a preposition. Consider this line from *Robots*: "You can shine no matter what you are made of." It would be ungrammatical to write, "You can shine no matter of what you are made," and it should sound foreign to you! Also consider that like Latin, the English language is able to use intransitive verbs in the passive voice! Consider "Speak only when you are spoken to." "Spoken to" are treated as a single unit in English, and this sentence can be "corrected" only by rewriting it in the active voice: "Speak only when someone speaks to you." This sentence makes assumptions because you may be spoken to by one person or by a group. When your sentence uses a relative pronoun, try to place the preposition in front of the relative. For instance, "It was the ball by which I was hit" works better than "It was the ball that I was hit by." Your sentences will generally be stronger if you try to follow this rule. After all, few people are going to say that their favorite part of speech is the preposition, and the end of your sentence is the most important, the most emphatic part!
19. An intuitive grasp of English usage, while not infallible, is the most flexible. You will write or speak most naturally if you can focus on the ideas and their communication, instead of thinking about the rules.
20. Good communication, written or oral, is more than just good grammar and spelling. It is also organization, clarity, attention to the audience, and a host of other things. In fact, while the

mechanics of communicating are good practice, they are secondary to the content and message. Put another way, if the meaning is sound, it's a simple matter to tidy up the mechanics.

21. Accept that the rules change over time. For instance, the word [data](#) was once strictly the plural of "datum", but has come to be used as a mass (or uncountable) noun, similar to "information" or "water".
22. Write first, fix second. Collect your ideas, then worry about the English.
23. The ability to spell is not necessarily an indicator of the ability to write, though the two skills are closely related. If spelling is not your strong point, use a dictionary or spell-checker before you publish a work or hand something in.