

Dr. Conkle's Professional Writing Tips

How to Avoid Colloquial (Informal) Writing

Although it may be acceptable in friendly e-mails and chat rooms, a major pitfall that has been bringing down the quality of formal, written text is the use of excessive colloquialism. Here are some steps/tips that you can follow to help to improve your overall writing.

Steps

1] **Know the meaning of colloquialism.** This can best be described as "writing in the way that one would speak." It is an informal, slang style of English that should be reserved primarily for speech, as it can seem unprofessional and sloppy in written text. A casual tone can be interpreted positively in person with face-to-face contact, but can be perceived negatively in writing.

2] **Understand basic English punctuation.** This might seem of negligible value at first, but when people speak, we usually disregard certain rules that are mandatory in writing. For example, we usually omit pauses that are required in formal writing, which are usually denoted by commas.

3] **Avoid using common colloquial words/expressions,** as listed below. Again, these are words that, while acceptable in speech, should not be used in formal writing.

4] **Avoid using "filler" words.** These words are not necessary, and should be removed.

- **Basically** – At best, it can be used to begin a sentence, but there are better choices available to replace the word, if it is not omitted entirely. (e.g., "A microphone is **basically** a device that is used to record sound.")

- **Even** – Often, this word is found as an "additive" to a series, as in the following example, but is generally not needed. (e.g., "The basket contained eggs, sandwiches, and **even** utensils.")

- **Just** – When used in the same context as BASICALLY, this is another overused filler word that one should omit. (e.g., "When pouring the solution, **just** be certain not to spill its contents.")

- **Well** – Generally used to begin a sentence following a question. (e.g., "Why is global warming a problem? **Well**, one major issue is the...")

5] **Avoid contractions.** Some people suggest that when writing formal papers, write-out your contractions. This depends on how formal you need to be. If you need to exterminate contractions, here are some suggestions: Replace *can't* with *cannot*, *doesn't* with *does not*, and so on. For example, instead of writing "Therefore, this **can't** be used as evidence in the case", write "Therefore, this **cannot** be used as evidence in the case."

6] **Limit your use of subjective pronouns.** If you are writing a formal, objective piece of writing, then you should avoid using the words "I", "me", "you", and "we". To avoid this, try writing from the third-person perspective. Naturally, formal business letters are an exception.

7] **Avoid splitting infinitives.** An infinitive is a verb preceded by the word "to," such as "to go" or "to want". When writing, some experts suggest that you should keep your infinitives together, rather than separating them with other words. For example, substitute "He tried **to not sneeze** in the library, but failed" with "He tried not **to sneeze** in the library, but failed."

- If you wish to use it for emphasis, as in, "He meant **to never sneeze** but sometimes couldn't help it", most professional editors would accept that. Note that this is now considered an archaic rule and professionals at all levels of writing will use either form as it suits their purpose.

8] **Avoid ending your sentences with a preposition.** In *most* cases, it is inappropriate to end a sentence with a preposition [i.e., *down, during, in, into, of, since*]. For example, replace "What is the bag filled **with**?" with "What is inside the bag?"

- There is much controversy over the formality/informality of ending a sentence with a preposition. There are cases where an additional preposition may be regarded as a filler word, as in "Where are you at?", but others where "less is more" applies. A good example is Winston Churchill's playoff on this rule, with his quote, "This is the type of arrant pedantry up with which I shall not put", in place of "This is the type of arrant pedantry I shall not put up with." For clarity reasons, the latter is preferable.

9] **Avoid clichés.** Clichés are phrases that have been exhausted to the point where they have completely lost originality.

- 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.

- There are **loads of** websites on the Internet.

Dr. Conkle's (random) Writing Tips
(with dry humor, and some sarcasm, added)
Updated 08-14-12

- 01] From Mark Twain (in a letter 10-15-1888): **“The difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lightning and the lightning bug.”**
Did “Bunky” throw a pebble, rock, or boulder at the side of his dad's barn? The point is, use a **good** Dictionary, not a Thesaurus. Broaden your vocabulary, so Twain can be supine in the grave and not roll over to a prone position.
- 02] From Day, R. A. (1994). How to write & publish a scientific paper (4th ed.) Phoenix, AZ: Oryx Press
- Each pronoun should agree with their antecedent.
 - Just between you and I, case is important.
 - A preposition is a poor word to end a sentence with.
 - Verbs has to agree with their subject.
 - Don't use no double negatives.
 - Remember to never split an infinitive.
 - Avoid cliches like the plague.
 - Join clauses good, like a conjunction should.
 - Do not use hyperbole, not one writer in a million can use it effectively.
 - About sentence fragments.
- 03] Use Standard English.
- 04] Be brief and concise with “professional writing,” with as much detail as possible. Be flowery with papers for an English class, not a professional course.
- 05] Do not use contractions in formal papers, unless they are part of quoted material – unless otherwise specified every assignment/paper for Dr. Conkle is a formal paper.
- 06] Spell (fully) single-digit numbers, use numerals for multiple-digit numbers (except when beginning sentences – APA) With standard units of measure it is okay to use a single-digit number.
- 07] Do not use gender-biased wording, when writing generally, do not be tempted to write in the masculine perspective. And, know that “gender” is the preferred word, as opposed to “sex,” when discussing males, females, and anyone who falls between the two. Be general or generic when possible (e.g., they, their).
- 08] There is almost no situation where “to be...” is appropriate or could not be said better with other wording, for example:
“Faculty members are scheduled to be at a meeting on the first Monday of each month.”
“Faculty members meet the first Monday of each month.”
“Everyone wanted Carol to be captain of the team.”
“Everyone wanted Carol as as team captain.”
- 09] Use “that,” “which,” “who,” and “whom” appropriately.
- 10] e.g., = for example; and, i.e., = that is
- 11] Use a passive 3rd-person voice when reporting facts, state things matter-of-factly; use an active (1st- and/or 2nd-person) voice when communicating how the facts relate to you, and/or, your past, present, or future.
- 12] Avoid “Widows” and “Orphans” in your documents. “Widows” are single lines of type left at the top of a page, and “Orphans” are single lines of type left at the bottom of a page. Adjust your paragraphs accordingly.
- 13] Use “spell check” and “grammar check” on your computer – proof-read everything multiple times, and have another trusted person proof your work for clarity and understanding (you will eventually get tunnel-vision).
- 14] Space twice after each end-punctuation, making papers more reader-friendly.
- 15] Avoid using “in order to”.....the initial two words are waste-words in practically all cases, adding nothing to clarity.
For example: “In order to prevent confusion, I have drafted this help-sheet.”
“To prevent confusion, I have drafted this help-sheet.”
- 16] Use “rather than,” and avoid “instead of.”
- 17] “Include,” “including” or “includes” is usually a better word choice than “comprised of” or “consists of.”
For example: “This help-sheet includes several suggestions.”
“This help-sheet consists of several suggestions.”
“This help-sheet is comprised of several suggestions.”
- 18] Know the appropriate places to use commas, semi-colons, hyphens, and parentheses.
- 19] Know that “a,” “an,” and “the” imply number(s) and can be interpreted quite literally.
- 20] Determine the most accurate and concise wording and use it. For example:
“Young women and men wishing to attend college should learn about various institutions before applying to them.”
“Prospective college students should research each institution before applying.”

- 21] Avoid infinitive phrases (to + a verb, although correct) when possible, they often waste character spaces.
Gerunds are preferred over infinitives (e.g., swimming, to swim; dreaming, to dream; telling, to tell; etc.)
Example: "Phil agreed to give me a ride to the store."
"Phil gave me a ride to the store."
- 22] Know when to use "although," "whereas," and "while." When a time relationship exists, use "while;" otherwise, "although" or "whereas" convey the thought. Also, use "although" as opposed to "even though."
- 23] Use **present tense** to communicate facts already published (key points from an article), indicating existent knowledge.
- 24] Limit the use of prepositions, for clarity; but, when they are used, use them in correct context, and do not be redundant.
Example:
"The enrollment of students in universities in America is growing to the point that professors have to explore new methods to teach and to grade papers."
"Student enrollment in American universities has grown so much that professors must explore new teaching and paper-grading methods."
- 25] Although technically both are correct, use "toward" rather than "towards" - do not waste the character space.
- 26] Rather than using "about," use "concerning" or "regarding" - they are so much cleaner. Or, always, consider re-wording in the most concise way. Example:
"Students were engaged in a discussion about college football commercialism at the party."
"Students had a discussion concerning college football commercialism at the party."
"Students had a discussion regarding college football commercialism at the party."
"Students discussed college football commercialism at the party."
- 27] Consult a "Writing Lab" or get a "Tutor" if you have persistent problems on papers.
- 28] Do not use "and/or" in papers, one or the other is most correct given the context in which it is used.
- 29] Consult an *APA Publication Manual* for guidance in your writing!!!!
- 30] By definition "whether" compares 2 or more concepts, do not use "whether" with "not" afterward - "not" is implied if there are no comparatives in a sentence.
Example: Incorrect - Bunky was not sure whether or not he would attend the game.
Correct - Bunky was not sure whether he would attend the game.
Correct - Bunky was not sure whether he would attend the game, stay home, or see a movie.
- 31] Avoid saying "based off of." Primarily it makes no sense; but, even if it did, it wastes words. It is correct to say, "based" "founded," "established," "initiated," "originated," etc. by/on/for - depending on context.
- 32] "Prove" / "Proof" - be aware that research deals with statistical probabilities; thus, findings or results do NOT prove things.
- 33] Avoid "Colloquial Writing."

Examples of Common Colloquial Words & Expressions

- A lot - This phrase should be replaced with a stronger something less informal, such as "several," or "many." Be mindful that "alot" is not a word (nor is "lots" in similar contexts).
"He has **a lot** of reasons for justifying his actions."
"He has **several** reasons for justifying his actions."
- Ain't - The word "ain't" has been incorrectly used as a contraction for "am not," "is not," "are not," "has not," and "have not." "Ain't" should never appear within formal writing.
"This **ain't** working."
"This **is not** working."
- Anyways - The word "anyways" is also always nonstandard and should usually not be used in formal writing. Always use "anyway."
"**Anyways**, thank you for your time."
"**Anyway**, thank you for your time."
- Could of, would of, should of - These are incorrect phrases, usually the result of trying to write what one hears (or thinks one hears). The phrases "could **have**," "would **have**," and "should **have**" are correct.
- Get - From time to time, this word replaces "understand".
"Do you **get** the homework?"
"Do you **understand** the homework?"
- Gonna, Wanna - These are the condensed versions of "going to" and "want to," respectively, which should be revised in formal writing accordingly.
"I am **gonna** go to the supermarket."
"I am **going to** go to the supermarket."
"I am **going to** the supermarket."

- Be careful when using “just” or “even” - they can be colloquial, unless they add clarity to a sentence do not include them.
- Kinda, kind of – The use of these words to mean "somewhat" or "rather" is informal, and should be avoided. KIND OF, when meant as "type of", is acceptable, but is somewhat overused. Consider replacing with "type of."
 “It is **kind of** cold outside.”
 "It is **rather** cold outside."
 "A parakeet is a **kind of** bird."
 "A parakeet is a **type of** bird."
- Like – Consider replacing with "as if", "similar to", or "such as", depending on the context.
 "It is **like** he never existed."
 "It is **as if** he never existed."
- Okay – This word is a derivative of "O.K.", which appeared as an abbreviation for "oll korrekt" (a conscious misspelling of "all correct") in 1839. It is similar to "alright."
 "Is everyone **okay**?"
 "Is everyone **all right**?"
- Pretty – Using this word tends to weaken one's argument, when used in place of "very," and should be either replaced or eliminated entirely.
 "I think this is a **pretty good** investment that your company should consider."
 "I think this is a **very worthwhile** investment that your company should consider."
- Real, really – Replace the word "real", as used in this context.
 "The coffee is **real** hot!"
 "The coffee is **very** hot!"
- Sorta, sort of – Similar to KINDA and KIND OF, these should be replaced when used to mean "rather" or "somewhat."
 "The project is **sorta** long."
 "The project is **somewhat** long."
- Use to – The proper form of this phrase, in writing, should be "used to." In speech, the **d** is sometimes silent, which makes for the confusion in writing.
 "As a child, I **use to** go to nursery school."
 "As a child, I **used to** go to nursery school."
 “As a child, I **attended** nursery school.”

2 Examples

John,
 I'm looking for a job and I've heard through the grapevine that you're looking for a workhorse to basically run the shop with. Well, I'm the man of the hour, cause I've got a lot to offer. I'm pretty hard-working, and I'm really good about being on time. I'm use to working by myself. Anyways, let me know if you want to get together for an interview, okay? (68 words)
 -Unprofessional Joe

Dear John:
 I understand you are looking for a strong worker to assist in your shop. I would appreciate consideration because I am diligent, punctual, and accustomed to working with minimal supervision. Please contact me if you are interested, to arrange an interview. I appreciate your time. (45 words)
 Respectfully,
 Professional Joe

Redundancy

Incorrectly = “hundreds **and hundreds**,” “thousands **and thousands**,” “more **and more**,” “over **and over**”
More Correctly = say a word once, and point made; “increasingly,” “repeatedly,” “often,” “generally,”
“typically,” “usually”

Incorrectly = “I’m **going to go** ahead and tell you...”
More Correctly = “I will tell you...” “I can tell you...” “I should tell you...” “I must tell you...”

Incorrectly = “You need to **go** ahead and **go** to the store.”
More Correctly = “You should leave now for the store.” “You must leave now for the store.”

Accuracy in Terminology

Kids are goats! In the allied professions of HPERD, and the sub-disciplines of Physical Education, we work with: children, youngsters, young people, infants, toddlers, students, athletes, student-athletes, adolescents, pre-pubescents, teenagers, performers, participants, clients, patients, customers, subjects (in research)

“Sport Arena” is a general, or generic usage, term that encompasses any and all of the following, where people compete and spectators typically gather to view, observe or enjoy sporting events:

Coliseum, Gym, Stadium, Field, Court (basketball, tennis, volleyball, badminton, etc.), Floor, Alley (bowling), Range (indoor or outdoor shooting, archery, firearm, marksmanship, etc.), Rodeo Corral, Swimming Pool, Water/Lake/River/Sea (crew, kayak, yacht races, fishing, etc.), Course (golf, cross-country skiing, etc.), Track (running events, Grand Prix, NASCAR, etc.); and, there are other venues or surfaces in and on which people compete or perform in the sport-world. **If you are reading this, you understand the point. Globally, universally, or generally, not every athlete or player performs on a court or floor, or on a field – do they?**

Other Tips

- Remember, less is more. Having a long, verbose paragraph does not necessarily mean that it is meaningful.
- Vary sentence lengths, some shorter and some longer. Write with a flow of wording, not a monotonous rhythm.
- Do not use slang. Try chatting with your friends online by using proper writing styles! Practice by using only proper writing styles in e-mail and on Face Book, or with IMs.
- Writing sounds stronger if you remove adverbial phrases and replace them with more meaningful words. For example, "very good" can be replaced with "excellent," "very nice" becomes "delightful," "very bad," becomes "terrible," "definitely true," becomes "obvious," and so on. As a general guideline, try to avoid "-y" words.
- Similarly, limit your use of "absolute" terms, such as "everyone", "always", "never." Unless you are relaying an indisputable fact, these highly opinionated words will weaken your writing. For example, "He **always** buys the most expensive shoes" could be revised to "He **often** buys the more expensive shoes."
- Try not to think of proper writing as strictly "academic." It makes you appear more intelligent. More importantly, it eliminates the risk of "slipping out" bad habits in situations where it is critical to convey professionalism.

Expand your vocabulary!

Read! Reading will help improve your vocabulary, and also help you distinguish between formal and informal writing.

- Use a thesaurus. If you are using a particular word too often, you might replace it with another term. **BUT.....check the dictionary definition to ensure you are using the “right word” rather than the “almost right word!”**

Remember, this help-sheet is not all-inclusive or comprehensive. As college students you should know, mostly, what is proper, and practice excellent writing skills.

The MC Writing Center has moved to a new location - at the library.

You'll find them on the first floor, near the LRC, next door to the Gore Art Gallery.

For more information, email: WritingCenter@mc.edu. Or, call: [601-925-3268](tel:601-925-3268)

Information can also be found at:

<http://www.mc.libguides.com/writingcenter>

<http://www.facebook.com/pages/Mississippi-College-Writing-Center/201150603274467>

When visiting the MC Writing Center, take your syllabus (so a tutor can see what your professor has given you). Also, take any notes you have taken concerning what the professor has mentioned regarding writing. From the beginning be sure you have a tutor/guide who fully understands APA! Do your preliminary work, and have a rough draft of sorts so the tutor can see what your initial problems or stumbling-blocks may be. They are there to guide you toward a better paper, not do the assignment for you.