

# 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

---

Even though contractions are not grammatically incorrect, they are too conversational for 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 your reader, the second person (“you,” “yours,” etc.) is never appropriate 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, people’s minds easily skip over them when reading. Clichés are also usually lazy and vague, and their meaning may be unclear to non-native English speakers. Instead find a non-cliché way to express the same thought so that you will keep 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 their 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 they could be  
cutting edge

## SLANG/COLLOQUIAL TERMS

---

Formal writing is standardized so that more people 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

basically  
totally  
cool  
piece of cake  
awesome  
blew my mind  
no problem

ASAP  
hit the road  
screw up  
snafu

## TENSE CONSISTENCY

---

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 they may wish to emphasize the number of deaths instead of the causes.

## ELLIPSES

---

Do not end a sentence with an ellipsis 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.

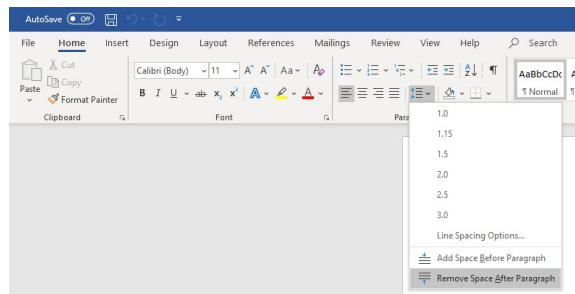
## SPACING ISSUES

---

Wonky or unnecessary spacing in a paper can look unprofessional. This includes the extra space your word processor (like Microsoft Word) adds by default after a paragraph. Turn off this setting to avoid adding unnecessary space.

If Word is adding extra space:

- ◆ In the Paragraph section of the Home tab, 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](mailto:WritingCenter@letu.edu).