

|                        |                              |
|------------------------|------------------------------|
| Rubric Category        | Language and Syntax          |
| Grade/Score            | Grades 6-12 / Scores 2 and 3 |
| CCSS Writing Standards | W1d                          |
| Argument Type          | All arguments                |

# How to Sound Authoritative

*Students play with using different levels of formality to communicate an idea in order to gain understanding of some of the key features of formal language.*

## Understanding the Expectations

You may have noticed that people speak, act, and dress differently from situation to situation. For example, when adults are speaking to other adults about serious topics like work or money, they may use a different tone of voice or choose their words a bit differently. It's quite likely that you do it too: you probably speak very differently when you're talking to your teacher in class than when you're talking to your friends outside of school. While these aren't really different languages the way that, say, Spanish and English are, they're different styles of language that are appropriate to the situation.

In much the same way, people typically choose their clothing based on the situation or place they'll be in. The clothes we wear to exercise or relax certainly don't match up to the clothes we would choose for going to a formal dance. And even among formal events, our clothes could take on quite a range of styles, like what people wear to a wedding, a funeral, or a business meeting.

In much the same way, writing a formal essay means considering how you dress up your words in order to make sure they are appropriate to the situation and the audience. For school essays, that means using standard, academic English. Academic English is like the business suit of language: it's not that it's more correct or always better than other kinds of language, but it's what's appropriate for a formal situation in an essay. And, just like when you're wearing a nice dress or a suit, when you use formal, academic English, you will seem more authoritative and persuasive to your reader.

So as you write and revise, keep an eye on the formality of your language. When you're getting ideas down, it's OK to pay attention to your thoughts and not worry so much about your "clothes," but at some point in the drafting and revising process, particularly toward the end, you need to make sure that your essay is wearing a suit or a nice dress, not a stained pair of sweatpants.

As you learn to master Academic English, it helps to remember that it typically does the following:

- Follows standard grammar rules
- Communicates formally
- Uses very specific words for ideas
- Speaks directly about claims, ideas, and evidence
- Uses complex and varied sentences structures or patterns
- Avoids slang and colloquialisms
- Avoids abbreviations (like LOL)
- Avoids first and second person pronouns (like me, you, mine, your, etc.)
- Avoids contractions (like can't or won't)

## Playing the "Dress Up Your Language" Game

1. If you are working on a full draft, review it to look for a few sentences that seem informal to you. If you're not sure which sentences to work with, choose some of your most important claims. If you are early in the writing process, review your list of claims and any ideas you've written down so far and choose a few sentences that you want to play with in order to make

them more formal. If you are truly right at the beginning of the writing process, you'll need to write at least a couple of sentences to use.

2. Create a digital document or work in your notebook and make three columns. Label one "Informal," one "More Formal," and one "Even More Formal."
3. Paste your example sentences into either the "Informal" column, or the "More Formal" column, depending on where they fit the best. Your notes should look something like this (except yours will have more sentences):

| Informal | More Formal  | Even More formal |
|----------|--|------------------|
|          | Jack is unkind to others because he makes them feel bad. |                  |

4. Now, either on your own or with a group, fill in the empty columns with more and less formal versions of the sentence. If you started with a sentence in the "Informal" column, write a more formal and an even more formal version. If you started in the middle column, write an even more formal version, and then have some fun writing an informal version. Now each sentence you started with should have two companion sentences. The example below has three versions of a sentence, along with explanations of what makes each one more or less formal.

| Informal   | More Formal  | Even More formal  |
|--|--|---|
| Jack's super duper mean because he is a jerk.  | Jack is unkind to others because he makes them feel bad.                           | Jack's unkind actions towards others make them feel worthless.  |
| This example uses slang terms (super duper and jerk), a contraction (Jack's) and a fairly vague word (mean). | This example uses a more specific word (unkind) and avoids slang and contractions. | This one avoids slang and contractions, it uses truly specific words, and the sentence structure is more complex. |

5. Now, look at the three versions of each sentence you wrote and consider which most belongs in your essay. You want to sound respectable and authoritative without sounding like you're being fake or trying too hard, so choose carefully and make adjustments when necessary.

## Writing It Up

If you are early in the writing process, consider working on a paragraph by writing your sentences with an eye on a formal style and authoritative tone. Learning to start out with a sense of formality can save you time later on in the revision process because you won't have to edit as much. If you are working on revising a full draft of an essay, continue to identify sentences that may be somewhat informal and work on revising them into more formal, precise, authoritative statements.