

How to Avoid Colloquial (Informal) Writing

While 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?" For a more complete list of prepositions, see [this](#) list.
 - 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.

Common Colloquial Words & Expressions

- A lot – This phrase should be replaced with a stronger something less informal, such as "several", or "many". Keep in mind that "alot" is not a word.
 - "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."
- Alright – This word is *always* nonstandard, and should not be used in formal writing. It is a compound of "all right".
 - "**Alright**, I am ready to go."
 - "**All right**, I am ready to go."
- Anyways – The word "anyways" is also always nonstandard and should usually not be used in formal writing. You should 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."
- 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 in language. 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 that this is a **pretty good** investment that your company should consider."
 - "I think that 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."

Example

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?

-Unprofessional Joe

Dear John:

I understand that you are looking for a strong worker to assist you 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 in setting up an interview. Thank you for your time.

Respectfully,

Professional Joe

Tips

- Remember that less is more. Having a long, verbose paragraph does not necessarily mean that it is meaningful. You can help to eliminate wordiness by writing in active tense, as opposed to passive tense.
- Keep slang usage to a minimum. You might try chatting with your friends online by using proper writing styles! If you do not like writing formally on AIM or MSN, then limit yourself to using only proper styles. That is, leave out the capitalization/punctuation.
- Your writing will sound 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 the "-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 **usually** 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 properness, such as writing a college essay, or a job résumé.
- [Expand your vocabulary](#)! Mastering new verbs can allow you to bring color to a paper by eliminating the need to employ the same words over and over again.
- [Read](#)! Reading will not only help to improve your vocabulary, but it will also help you to distinguish between formal and informal writing.
- [Use a thesaurus](#). If you find that you are using a particular word too often, you might replace it with another term.