

# Deciding When to Use Formal and Informal Language



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The type of language you use in writing depends on your purpose and audience.

## When to Use Formal Language

When your purpose is to explain a topic or idea to a teacher, a classmate, or the public, use formal language. Formal language is serious and interesting, as if you are teaching your readers. This language works best in explanatory essays, research reports, and most other academic writing.

*Thurgood Marshall was a civil rights lawyer who became the first African American ever to serve on the Supreme Court. His biggest achievement, however, was his role in a legal case that changed America for the better.*

### Characteristics of formal language:

- ✓ teaching tone
- ✓ limited personal pronouns (*I, me, you*) and contractions (*you'd, we've*)

- ✓ academic vocabulary
- ✓ longer sentences
- ✓ neutral voice

**Your Turn** Reread the sample paragraph about Thurgood Marshall and write down parts that show characteristics of formal language.

(Answers will vary.)

Thurgood Marshall, civil rights lawyer, first African American ever to serve on the Supreme Court, legal case that changed America

## When to Use Informal Language

Other writing situations call for more casual, informal language. When your purpose is to share your personal thoughts and feelings or to tell a story, use language that sounds more like you are talking with your friends or classmates. This type of language works best for stories, personal narratives, and social forms (blogs, microblogs, personal email).

*When I finally stepped on stage, my mind froze. "Oh no," I thought. "I forgot my line." I started to feel embarrassed, but then I looked at Chad. He pointed to his hat. That's it! I remembered what I was supposed to say.*

### Characteristics of informal language:

- ✓ conversational tone
- ✓ frequent personal pronouns (*I, me, you*) and contractions (*you'd, we've*)
- ✓ informal expressions (*what's up?*)
- ✓ shorter sentences
- ✓ personal feelings

**Your Turn** Reread the sample paragraph about the stage play and write down parts that show characteristics of informal language.

(Answers will vary.)

I finally stepped, my mind froze, "Oh no," feel embarrassed, I looked at Chad, That's it!, I remembered

**Your Turn** Review the following writing scenarios. Decide which two should use formal language and which one should use informal language. Explain your choices.

1. Jackie Robinson showed great courage in becoming the first African American to play major league baseball. Share a personal experience in which you demonstrated courage or witnessed someone else demonstrating courage.

**Informal Language:** I am sharing a personal experience, so I should use frequent pronouns and include personal feelings.

2. Write a biographical essay that explains the key events in the life of Jackie Robinson.

**Formal Language:** The biographical essay is an academic assignment about an important person, so it should be formal.

3. In a classroom report, write about how Jackie Robinson broke baseball's racial barrier, showing causes and effects.

**Formal Language:** The classroom report is an academic assignment about an critical time in American life, so it should be formal.

- See more at

<http://k12.thoughtfullearning.com/minilesson/deciding-when-use-formal-and-informal-language>