

Avoiding Informal Wording

Academic writing requires you to differentiate between formal and informal vocabulary. Avoiding slang and colloquial expressions is important, but writers must also be aware of more formal alternatives when choosing a verb, noun, or other parts of speech. Understanding the history of the English language helps explain this distinction: While spoken English heavily relies on a core of Anglo-Saxon vocabulary, synonyms derived from Latin or French are favoured as the "educated" equivalent in formal written language.¹ Examples of formal alternatives to different parts of speech are provided below.

1) Informal vs. formal verbs

See the BU Writing Centre *Strong Verbs* handout for an explanation of strong verb alternatives.

Informal verb	Formal alternative
end	terminate, conclude
mean	denote, indicate, imply, suggest, signify
have to / have got to	should, must, need to

2) Informal vs. formal prepositions

Many prepositions used in everyday spoken English tend to sound less appropriate for academic writing. Here are some of the most common formal alternatives.

Informal preposition	Formal alternative
about	concerning, regarding
before	prior to
in	within
on top of	above, over, beyond

3) Informal vs. formal adjectives

Informal	A lot of good policies have led to big changes in nature conservation.
Formal	Many effective policies have led to major changes in nature conservation.

A lot of, good, and big are common in spoken English, but they are less descriptive and academic than the suggested alternatives. Look for more precise synonyms.

Informal adjective	Formal alternative
a lot of, lots of	Use an exact amount whenever you can. If you don't have an exact quantity, then use a more formal word such as <i>many, numerous, myriad, and considerable</i> .
big, huge	large, great, high, major, considerable, substantial
small, tiny	minute, insignificant, minor, trivial, negligible, meager
hard	difficult, arduous, laborious, painstaking
good	suitable, appropriate, effective, beneficial, advantageous
bad	poor, inappropriate, unsuitable, ineffective, defective, faulty
this kind of / this sort of	such (a/an)
different	various, a variety of, individual

4) Informal vs. formal adverbs

Informal adverb	Formal alternative
often	frequently
sometimes	occasionally
every now and then	periodically
usually	typically, commonly
a little bit	somewhat
a lot	much, greatly, considerably, drastically
more and more	increasingly
fast	rapidly
widely	extensively

Material paraphrased from:

¹<http://sana.aalto.fi/awe/style/vocabulary/index.html>

