Formal Writing Voice

Have you ever attended an event in which "formal" attire is expected? You probably did not wear old jeans with holes in the knees, a stained tee shirt promoting your favorite beverage, and a pair of sandals. You probably chose more formal attire.

If you were giving an important speech to a group of people you do not know, would you use the same kind of language you use when talking with friends? Probably not. Recognizing your lack of familiarity with the audience, the importance of the occasion, your desire to demonstrate your knowledge of the subject, and the impression you would like to make, you would probably use a more formal voice for your speech than what you would use when talking with close friends.

For all of the essays you write for this course, you should use a formal writing voice. You should use the kind of language you would use when giving an important speech, not the kind of language you might use when talking with close friends. A formal tone helps establish the writer's respect for the audience and suggests that the writer is serious about his or her topic. It is the kind of tone that educated people use when communicating with other educated people. Most academic writing uses a formal tone.

The following guidelines should help you maintain a formal writing voice in your essays.

1. Do not use first-person pronouns ("I," "me," "my," "we," "us," etc.).

   Using these expressions in analytical and persuasive essays can make the writing wordy, can make the writer seem less confident of his or her ideas, and can give the essay an informal tone. Use of first-person pronouns is unnecessary in the kinds of essays you are writing for the course. Readers will know that they are reading your thoughts, beliefs, or opinions, so you do not need to state, "I think that," "I believe that," or "in my opinion." Simply delete these expressions from sentences, and you will be left with stronger sentences.

   Example
   I think that this character is confused.
   This character is confused.
   (The second sentence is less wordy, sounds more formal, and conveys a more confident tone.)

   "One," "the reader," "readers," "the viewer," or something similar sometimes can be used effectively in place of first-person pronouns in formal papers, but be careful not to overuse these expressions. You want to sound formal, not awkward and stiff.

   Example
   I can sense the character's confusion.
   Readers can sense the character's confusion.

2. Avoid addressing readers as "you."

   Addressing readers using second-person pronouns ("you, your") can make an essay sound informal and can bring assumptions into an essay that are not true. A student once wrote in her essay, "If you wear a tube top, guys might think that you are easy." I wondered why the student would think that I, a male, would wear a tube top. As with first-person pronouns, second-person pronouns can be replaced by words such as "one," "the reader," "readers," and "the viewer."
3. **Avoid the use of contractions.**

Contractions are shortened versions of words that use apostrophes in place of letters, such as "can't," "isn't," "she's," and "wouldn't." The more formal, non-contracted versions are "cannot," "is not," "she is," and "would not." You might be surprised by how much better a sentence can sound if non-contracted versions of the words replace the contractions.

Example
The character isn't aware that he's surrounded by people he can't trust.
The character is not aware that he is surrounded by people he cannot trust.

Making your writing more formal by avoiding contractions is easy: just find the contractions and replace them with the non-contracted versions of the words.

4. **Avoid colloquialism and slang expressions.**

Colloquial diction is informal language used in everyday speech and includes such words as "guys," "yeah," "stuff," "kind of," "okay," and "big deal." Highly informal diction, such as "freak out" and "dissing," falls into the category of "slang." While slang words often are vivid and expressive, slang comes and goes quickly, another reason why slang should be avoided in formal writing. Both colloquialism and slang expressions convey an informal tone and should be avoided in formal writing.

Example
The guy was nailed for ripping off a liquor store.
The man was convicted of robbing a liquor store.

As you avoid informal language, be careful not to use words that suggests ideas that you may not intend. "The gentleman was convicted of robbing a liquor store" would probably leave readers wondering why the man who robbed the store is considered to be a "gentleman." Likewise, "the lady was convicted of robbing a liquor store" would probably cause readers to wonder why a woman who robs a liquor store is considered to be a "lady."

5. **Avoid nonstandard diction.**

Nonstandard diction refers to expressions that are not considered legitimate words according to the rules of Standard English usage. Nonstandard diction includes "ain't," "theirselves," "hissel," "anyways," "alot" (the accepted version is "a lot"), and "alright" (the accepted version is "all right"). Most good dictionaries will identify such expressions with the word "Nonstandard." Because nonstandard expressions generally are not regarded as legitimate words, I mark these expressions in essays as examples of "inaccurate word choice."

6. **Avoid abbreviated versions of words.**

For example, instead of writing "photo," "phone" and "TV," write "photograph," "telephone," and "television."
7. **Avoid the overuse of short and simple sentences.**
While the writer might use formal diction in such sentences, too many short and simple sentences can make an essay sound informal, as if the writer is not recognizing that the audience is capable of reading and understanding more complex and longer sentences. Short and simple sentences can be used effectively in formal writing, but heavy reliance on such sentences reflects poorly on the writer and gives the writing an informal tone.

**Final Comments**
Do not confuse formal diction with presumptuous diction (the kind of language that seems intended mainly to impress readers) or jargon (the kind of language only familiar to people within a specialized field, such as computer technicians).

You should not sound "artificial" as you use formal diction. Instead, consider that different situations require different uses of language and that educated people are able to adapt their use of language to a variety of writing and speaking situations. Educated people have several different writing and speaking voices, and one voice is no more "genuine" than another. Instead, the different voices reflect choices based on the writing or speaking situation. Through your word choice in essays, you can portray yourself as an intelligent person who is aware of your audience--a group of well-educated people whom you do not know. Imagine the kind of language that you might use in a job interview for an important job. With formal diction, you can express yourself clearly, accurately, and effectively, without relying on the kind of language that you might use in less formal situations.