


大学生研究生 英语写作指导

A GUIDE TO
ENGLISH WRITING
FOR UNDERGRADUATES
& POSTGRADUATES

《大学公共英语学习丛书》

金振东 编著



北京出版社

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FOREWORD

This book is designed to offer a practical guide to writing essays, research papers, letters, résumés and technical reports in English for both undergraduate and graduate students and scientific and technical workers. The reference book can help locate and correct their problems in writing with or without the help of a teacher. It is my desire that the reader will find it worth reading.

J.Z.D.

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PART ONE

THE WORD

I. Appropriateness and Exactness

One of the difficulties in writing is the choice of words that best allows you to express your thoughts to your readers. That choice is always made according to your subject, purpose, and readers. For this reason no dictionary will give you the right word. It can only tell you what meanings a word generally has. You have to decide for yourself which, if any, of these meanings meets your needs. But, as background for that decision, it will be useful to take into consideration the following two qualities: appropriateness and exactness.

A. Appropriateness

1. Standard and Nonstandard English

Standard English, as Peter Trugill, a sociolinguist, defines, is "that variety of English which is usually used in print, and which is normally taught in school and to nonnative speakers learning the language." The other variety of English is nonstandard English, which includes usages from numerous regional and social dialects. Nonstandard English can also be found in print, chiefly in dialogue that attempts to reproduce nonstandard speech patterns. However, it is not used in technical writing. Here are a few examples of nonstandard English words and constructions:

a. Nonstandard English words

Examples:

I ain't like it. (I don't like it.)

Come tonite. (Come tonight.)

He et a apple. (He ate an apple.)

b. Nonstandard English constructions

Examples:

That John house. (That is John's house.)

There's not no way to do that. (There's no way to do that.)

I gonna do it. (I am going to do it/I'm gonna do it.)

2. Usage Labels

In all languages people speak in different ways to different kinds of people on different occasions. You do not, for example, speak to your best friends in exactly the same way you speak to your professors. You choose language that is suitable for the person you are speaking to. Written and spoken English are similar but not exactly the same. In dictionaries, grammar books, and textbooks, you can find usage labels that tell the connotations of words. Usage labels also tell when words are polite or impolite. Each dictionary has a key to the labels it uses and their abbreviations. All dictionaries show the difference between formal and informal usage.

archaic — once common but now rare

Colloquial — language of familiar speech not used in formal writing

dialect — language of a limited region or class

formal — standard English or sometimes ceremonial English, as in a court or church

informal — speech of educated people; often a substitute for colloquial

literary — used mainly in literature

modern — shows a change in meaning from an earlier time

obscene — connected with functions of the body such as

sex or the bowels; generally vulgar or taboo
obsolete — disappeared from current use but found in
older writing

old use — sometimes obsolete; sometimes words that have
nearly disappeared from current use

poetic — used mainly in poetry

profanity — irreverence or contempt for God, religious
beliefs, or religious objects; includes blasphemy,
cursing, and swearing

regional — used in a limited geographical area

slang — language that is not usually acceptable in serious
speech or writing, including words, expressions, etc.,
regarded as very informal or not polite, and those
used among particular groups of people.

standard English and standard edited English — language
used in writing, particularly in academic, business,
and scientific writing

taboo — never used in polite society; profane or obscene

vulgar — rarely used in polite society; sometimes means
obscene

Because labels can be only rough guides to usage, you need
to supplement the advice they offer with your own judgement
of their appropriateness of a word in a particular situation.

3. Formal, Informal, and General Written English

a. Formal English

Current written English is found in some text-books — particularly those for advanced courses — and in some learned journals. Outside academic circles it appears in books and articles addressed to well-educated audiences willing to make a greater intellectual effort than is called for by newspaper or a popular magazine. Formal is appropriate (though not obligatory) for writing on philosophy, religion, aesthetics, literature, theoreti-

cal science, and so forth. Though its subject matter is likely to be intellectual, its tone need not be solemn. Wit and formal English are often happily allied. Here is an example of current formal English:

The children, we hear, are badly taught and cannot read, spell, or write; employers despair of finding literate clerks and typists; the professions deplore the thickening of jargon which darkens counsel and impedes action; scientists cry out in their journals that their colleagues cannot report their facts intelligibly; and businessmen declare many bright people unemployable for lack of the ability to say what they mean in any medium. — Wilson Follett, *Modern American Usage*

Such deliberate, studied arrangement of elements in a series ('employers despair...; the professions deplore...; scientists cry out...'), as well as careful, often self-conscious word choice ("the thickening of jargon which darkens counsel and impedes action"), characterizes formal writing, making its impact quite different from that of most general and all informal English.

b. Informal English

Informal written English is the variety of standard English that most of us use naturally in letters to members of our families and to close friends, in diaries and journals and in other kinds of personal, intimate expression. It's also used — sometimes appropriately, sometimes not — when writers who share no intimacy with the readers they are addressing try to reduce the distance between themselves and their audiences. The following passage (from a book that was first talked into a tape recorder and then transcribed and carefully edited) manages to keep the feel of informal while ending up in the general-to-informal range.

The football season is almost upon us, so I got to thinking about some basic differences in the two games

for the players. Baseball players play so many games it's impossible to get emotionally high for any one of them. Football players get all gung-ho in the locker room. They chant and shout and jump up and down and take pills and hit each other on the helmet and shoulderpads and spit and kick and swear and they're ready to go out and bust some heads. If a baseball player got that emotional, he'd go out swinging hard — and miss. I think baseball is more of a skill sport than any other. Hitting is the single most difficult feat in sports. Second most difficult is preventing hitting. — Jim Bouton, Ball Four

The one thoroughly informal sentence in the whole paragraph is the fourth, the underlined one.

c. General English

Occupying the broad middle ground between formal and informal is general written English. It's the variety of standard English that educated people most often read and that they themselves most often write. Writers of general English are likely to use words that are concrete, close to experience, referring to things, people, actions, and events more than to abstractions. The turns of phrase reflect those of speech (look into, give up, take over); coordinating conjunctions like "and" and "so" are much more common than conjunctive adverbs like furthermore and consequently. Typical sentences are moderate in length, with few interrupting phrases or elaborate constructions.

General written English is much less conservative than formal, more controlled than informal. Though it's more likely than informal to follow strict conventions of subject-verb agreement, it doesn't do so as consistently as formal does. It often ignores formal distinctions, as between "can" and "may", "raise" and "rear". Yet it's slower than informal to accept slang. And while the writer of general English is less conserva-

tive than the writer of formal English, he may be quite as careful. Indeed, because his style is not so restricted by conventions, he has more choices to make than the formal writer does.

General English is the most versatile and the most serviceable of the three varieties of standard written English.

4. Four Types of Words

No word is in itself inappropriate. All kinds of words can be put into appropriate use. However, some words are appropriate to some situations, but not to others. This distinction can be shown by considering four types of words: learned, popular, colloquial, and slang.

a. Learned Words

Words which are more often seen in reading than heard in ordinary conversation and more widely used by the educated than the uneducated are called learned words. They make up the vocabulary of formal English and are appropriate for writing on science, technology, philosophy, literature, religion, and so forth. Technical terms are of the learned type. In writing technical subject intended for the general reader, strictly technical terms should be avoided, if possible: otherwise those that must be used should be explained. When writing for specialists, on the other hand, do not overexplain. Instead, simply refer to concepts the reader is familiar with with the standard terminology of the field. Technical terms permit efficient and precise communication between specialists who know the concepts that such terms refer to.

b. Popular Words

Popular words, the basic elements of English, are indispensable for everyday communication. They are used in speech by speakers regardless of their education or social status. They are also used in writing. They belong to general English, which is more versatile and serviceable than formal and informal English.