

Usage in a Top Hat

We tell our thoughts, like our children, to put on their hats and coats before they go out.

H W Fowler, *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage*

Even if they don't call it that, most scientific journals employ a restrained, formal style, and writers and editors for those publications must develop a heightened awareness of that style—what constitutes it and what deviates from it.

In *The Five Clocks* (1961), linguist Martin Joos described five levels, or “registers”, of English usage: *frozen*, *formal*, *consultative*, *casual*, and *intimate*. Although not universally accepted, Joos's distinctions nonetheless found favor with many linguists. Joos defined *formal* as “the standard sentence syntax and word choice of work and school”, a definition that I regard as not quite adequate to define the usage that most scientific and technical journals follow. Joos seemed to refer almost as much to the social framework of the usage as to the usage itself. I think that formal English bears some or all of the attributes that follow, but first, I'd like to tinker with Joos's categories a bit.

I distinguish among the following usage groups, all of which fall generally in the class of standard or acceptable English, and all of which range broadly across the middle three of Joos's groups.

- **Formal English** is the language of dissertations, research journals, legal opinions, and Nobel Prize acceptance addresses. It asks more of its audience. It is sober, circumspect, and self-conscious. Its vocabulary is refined if not specialized. It is the hardest English to produce, not just because of its elevated content but also because even at its best it can be stiff and flat, and at its worst, arcane and stuffy.
- **Working English** is the English that you read in many daily newspapers and hear delivered by network commentators. You read it and hear it on the editorial pages of the *New York Times* and on the evening news as spoken by Brian Williams. It is the educated English that people use when composing a memo for

their office peers or speaking to a group about a serious topic. It is the English I use in this column.

- **Informal English** is the unstudied language of our daily lives—language on the fly. You hear it across the table at meals and in the hallways at work. It is not necessarily substandard or ungrammatical, but its vocabulary is relaxed, its sentences are elliptical, and its style is free. It is full of color and slang, “OK”, and “See ya!” It is English in blue jeans.

What elevates formal English above its raffish fellow travelers on the good ship *Usage*?

1. **It minds its words.** Word choice probably exerts the biggest influence on formality of expression. Formal writing usually employs a more advanced vocabulary and appeals to a wider-ranging, more enriched experience. *Receive* is more formal than *get*, *purchase* than *buy*, *peruse* than *read*. (*Peruse* is a word whose stature has changed in our lifetimes; today, it almost evokes a smile at its air of stuffiness and pretentiousness.) In *A Dictionary of Modern American Usage* (1998), Bryan A Garner provides a column of 71 formal words—mostly nouns but some verbs—and their “ordinary” equivalents, for example, *approximately/about*, *endeavor/try*, *luncheon/lunch*, *remainder/rest*, and *summon/send for*. He uses *residence*, *house*, and *digs* to exemplify the progression from formal to “ordinary” to slang, respectively.
2. **It follows a roadmap.** Formal writing usually defines its subject and provides the schema it will follow in discussing it. A pattern or thought syllabus is laid out, often progressing through discrete stages that are understood or agreed on in advance between writer and audience—for instance, the familiar Introduction, Methods, Results, and Discussion (IMRAD) plan favored by many professional groups and their technical publications.
3. **It observes a more intricate sentence and paragraph design.** The sentences

of formal writing are likely to be longer than those in other types of writing. They often employ parallel constructions that balance dependent and independent clauses. Paragraphs are sequenced skillfully and logically, and greater thought is applied to topic-sentence linkage and transitions from paragraph to paragraph.

4. It doesn't cut corners. The more formal the English, the fewer the contractions, elliptical shortcuts, and word truncations: *has not, will not, are not, you are, he will, she is, they would, let us, for hasn't, won't, aren't, you're, he'll, she's, they'd, let's. We think that we will discover the solution among the copepods* for *We think we'll discover the solution among the copepods*. Acronyms, initialisms, and other abbreviations are derived: *wafer fabrication plants* for *fabs*; *Los Angeles* for *LA*.

5. It prizes information over effect. Formal writing is more factual and less personal. It reduces the “mist of ego between the reader and the page” (Jacques Barzun). Formal writing is plainer, grayer, more matter-of-fact, less adorned with figures of speech, less regional, and (sadly) usually less colorful.

Don't be a *nakkele*. Here's a delightful book on fascinating words in world languages: *The Meaning of Tingo*, by Adam Jacot de Boinod. The author researched word meanings in 280 languages, finding, for example, that *tingo* is a Pascuense (Easter Island) word meaning “to borrow objects from a friend's house, one by one, until there's nothing left”. *Nakkele*? You'll have to read the BBC News story below to find out.

news.bbc.co.uk/go/em/fr/-/1/hi/magazine/4248494.stm

Chuckle of the Month. From the Atherton, California (second-richest town in America), police blotter: “A citizen reported a suspicious man in a dark BMW convertible prowling around the site of a home under construction. Police investigated and found that the man was the architect.”