Formal vs. Informal Language

Informal language is the type of English usually encountered when people speak to one another and use social media. It may involve the use of slang words, abbreviations, and contractions. Most informal language uses several simple words to describe an idea that could be expressed in one single, precise word.

Formal language is more common when one is writing or speaking to an academic or professional audience. Formal language is used in academic essays, lab reports, cover letters, and resumes, to indicate that the speaker is knowledgeable, credible, and respectful. In particular, academics use formal language to present their arguments and research in clear, unbiased language.

What makes a word formal?
- There is no clear dividing line between formal and informal words. Sometimes, words that are informal in one circumstance are formal in another context. For example, "kid" is a precise term used to describe a baby goat under the age of six months, but it is informal to refer to a human child as a kid.
- The best way to distinguish formal from informal writing is to learn by example; read peer-reviewed, academic essays and books. Pay attention to what the authors say, as well as words they do *not* use.
- What follows on the next page is a short list of several informal words and phrases. Try searching for these words in a thesaurus. Are there more precise synonyms available? Some of the provided formal equivalents to these phrases will not be suitable for all situations. Because formal language is so precise, formal words can have limited meanings specific to only certain situations.

A note on using the first and second person:
- In formal, academic essays (especially ones at the undergraduate level), it is preferable to refrain from writing in the first and/or second person perspective. The first person perspective refers to you, the author, and uses personal pronouns such as "I," "we," "me," and "us." The second person perspective refers to your reader/audience and uses the personal pronouns "you" and "yours."
- When authors avoid referring to themselves, they are able to present evidence in a more objective manner that leaves interpretation and judgement to the reader. Basically, it helps promote independent thought. A simple way to avoid referring to yourself and/or your reader is to refer to yourself/the reader as "one." For example, if I want to say that you (the person reading this handout right now) might want to read the whole paper, I would say, "One may choose to read through this entire handout."

Several Informal Words and Their Formal Equivalents

Informal	Formal	Informal	Formal
Informal Nouns		**Contractions**	
kid	child, infant, juvenile	won't	will not
good	positive	can't	can not
bad	negative	don't	do not
smart	intelligent, informed	isn't	is not
cheap	inexpensive	it's	it is
		they're	they are
Informal Verbs		we're	we are
to set up	to establish, to construct		
to look at	to examine, to view	**Abbreviations**	
to find out	to discover, to reveal	TV	television
to put off	to discard, to delay	web	internet
to show up	to arrive, to appear	ASAP	as soon as possible
to go on to	to continue	photo	photograph
to get	to obtain, to acquire	**Colloquialisms and Clichés**	
to take on	to attempt		
to do	to conduct	in the end	to conclude, ultimately
to go over	to review	to sum it all up	In conclusion
		raining cats and dogs	pouring rain
Informal Emphasis		**Transitional Words/Phrases**	
a lot of/lots of	several, multiple	anyways	to digress
		also	additionally

- For an expanded list of informal words and their formal equivalents, see *engVID*'s "Formal & Informal English" page: https://www.engvid.com/english-resource/formal-informal-english/.