Many first year students struggle with using the appropriate degree of formality when writing at the college level. Often, what they feel is too informal or—as is often the case—too colloquial, many students simply have no idea how to address the issue, no matter how much they would like to improve. Long established habits of using social media and texting—in which grammar and diction are neglected as non-essential—often exacerbate this problem.

The process

Defining formality

Students were given four examples that exemplified formality in writing. Students were instructed to choose an example that they would. Under the guidance of their instructor, they wrote the same paragraph of analysis of that example as they normally would. The process of writing the assignment and the readings would be to help them practice, and to guide their exposure to formal academic writing. To accomplish this, I created a homework assignment and a series of readings. Then, I measured the formality of essays they had submitted before and after the readings & activities I had created. Students were given four examples that exemplified the kind of formal writing that they were expected to produce in college.

The assignment

• Students were instructed to choose an example that they were thinking of using in their upcoming essay and to write a paragraph of analysis of that example as they normally would.
• Then, they were asked to rewrite the same paragraph/ideas as a Facebook message, as a Tweet, as if they were Shakespeare, and as though writing to a Justice of the Supreme Court. In this extreme way, they were able to practice modifying the formality of their writing.

The readings

• Students were given four examples that exemplified the kind of formal writing that they were expected to produce in college:
  - Two excerpts from critical essays about stories they had read for our class
  - Two original pieces—One essay about a story they had read for our class, one paragraph about a story they had not read

Measuring formality

• Given the limited scope of my project, these are the criteria I set out to measure the formality of student writing:
  - Use of contractions
  - Use of colloquialism/clichés
  - Use of the words “good,” “bad,” and “a lot”

#The Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measures of Formality</th>
<th>Before</th>
<th>After</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Colloquialisms/ Clichés</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contractions</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good, bad, a lot</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#General formality

• Deliberately informal: “The story is kinda confusing cuz a bunch of weird stuff happens…”
• Deliberately formal: “Throughout Ellison’s “I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream” the reader is given ambiguous descriptions that lack the ability to present a reader with a full understanding of the setting or surroundings.”

# CONTRACTION

• Deliberately formal: “I understand that our world needs to innovate ideas when referring to new technology, but as the foreseeable circumstances demonstrate in “I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream,” if society reaches the point where a piece of technology has the ability to cause a collapse of our world, further actions need to be set on the control of what we can innovate our advanced technology into.”

#Cliché

• Deliberately informal: “Yo Joey, today I read a story in class about how this computer called AM took over the world and controlled every aspect of the human race. It was absolutely crazy man. The thing killed humans and just terrorized them. Like if this author is trying to explain this is what our world is coming to I’m fricking scared”

#Typographical error

• Deliberately formal: “After Formal Writing Assignment & Readings

#Student responses

@Todd

“Throughout Ellison’s “I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream,” the reader is given ambiguous descriptions that lack the ability to present a reader with a full understanding of the setting or surroundings.”

@Jake

“Deliberately informal: “I understand that our world needs to innovate ideas when referring to new technology, but as the foreseeable circumstances demonstrate in “I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream,” if society reaches the point where a piece of technology has the ability to cause a collapse of our world, further actions need to be set on the control of what we can innovate our advanced technology into.”

@Kate

“Deliberately formal: “In the short story “I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream” the author, Harlan Ellison, includes many references to the act or idea of sex. These references add the new theme of sex mixed with violence. Ellison is attempting to show the reader that the two are not as different as one may initially believe.”

#What I’d change

If I have students complete the formal writing activity more than once, or have them complete that and more similar activities, I think their ability to control the formality of their writing would be more substantially improved. My project would also benefit from a more comprehensive means of measuring formality.