We're Not Exactly tweeting Here:

Teaching Students to Control the Level of Formality of their Writing

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Compose new Tweet

What's happening?

Many first year students struggle with using the appropriate degree of formality when writing at the college level. Often, when told that their writing 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.

128   **Tweet**

#what I did

The process
- I hypothesized that the best way to help students achieve more control over the formality of their writing was 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.

Defining formality
- *"The formal style of language has the features of detachment, accuracy, rigidity, cognitive load, and dense information [...] In contrast, informal style has the features of flexibility, directness, implicitness, involvement and less information."* [1]
- Taking this definition and the scope of my project into account, the most immediate way I could help my students control their writing formality would be to help them eliminate certain common informalities like **colloquialisms** and **contractions**.

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 are 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"

#student responses

Deliberately informal: *Students wrote their ideas in the form of a Facebook message to a friend (the height of informality)*
Deliberately formal: *Students wrote the same ideas in the form of an address to a Supreme Court Justice (the height of formality)*
* All student names have been changed to preserve anonymity

@Todd

Deliberately informal:
"The story is kinda confusing cuz a bunch of werid 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."

@ Jake

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"

general informality
contraction
cliché
typographical error **
**(not measured in final results)

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."

@ Kate

Deliberately informal:
"Also, legit like every parpagraph or page has some word in it like masturbate or jerk that is just ridiculously sexual, but he isnt even describing something sexual. definitly just a way to play with our minds and keep us thinking about sex"

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."

#the results

Analysis of Measures of Formality Before & After Formal Writing Assignment & Readings

Measures of Formality	Before	After
Colloquialisms/ Clichés	63	39
Contractions	19	10
Good, bad, a lot	12	9

Based on my measurements, it is clear that the assignment and readings probably had a positive impact on students' ability to control the formality of their writing.

#conclusions

The fact that these informality indicators are still present in student essays after completing my assignment sequence suggests that they legitimately put thought into controlling the formality of their writing, and did not arbitrarily eliminate the use of these markers in order to appease me.

Note:
I do not believe, nor do I teach, that colloquialisms or contractions have no place in formal academic writing; they can be used sparingly as a matter of personal writing style as long as the writing is formal in general. Learning the kind of control that I hoped to teach is the best thing I can do toward helping students develop a personal writing style.

before

after

Word clouds of some of the colloquialisms found in student writing

#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 extensive means of measuring formality.
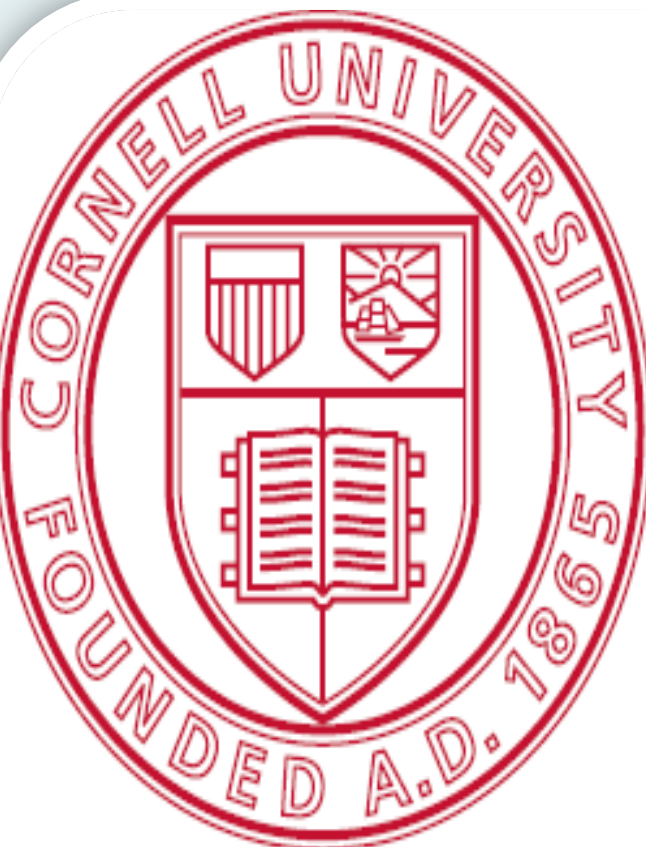
Cornell University
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1. Li, H., Graesser, A.C., & Cai, Z. (2013a). Comparing two measures of formality. In C. Boonthum-Denecke & G. M. Youngblood *(Eds.)*, *Proceedings of the Twenty-sixth International Florida Artificial Intelligence Research Society Conference* (pp. 220-225). Palo Alto, California: AAAI Press.