

From oral to written language

Speech has always been our primary form of communication. Writing conventions enable us to freeze speech and attach it to the page. As such, we share certain agreed upon expectations in writing. For example, writing in English is more formal than texting or email. Texts and emails are concise, words are abbreviated--skeletal, ideas are shared but they often lack transitions and the niceties we expect in more formal writing. So as you write more formally here are some things to consider.

First, much of what we write makes sense to us but often is difficult for others to read because the paper lacks punctuation. If your papers are getting marked "fragment" or "run on sentence", that means you are not signaling the breaks in speech properly. We have road signs in writing that tell us to pause. These signs include periods, commas, semi-colons, colons, dashes and ellipses. We also link ideas with words that signal relationship. These linking signs include conjunctions (subordinate and coordinate). Coordinating conjunctions include "and", "but", "or", "yet", "for", "nor", "so". And then there are subordinating conjunctions which leads to a much larger list: after, although, as, as if, as long as, as though, because, before, even if, even though, if, if only, in order that, now that, once, rather than, since, so that, than, that, though, till, unless, until, when, whenever, where, whereas, wherever, while. We all have a pretty good built in sense of where pauses should occur in speech. Read your words aloud and add the road signs.

Second, some words sound alike but have very different meanings. Differentiating between them is a bit like figuring out how identical twins are different. It may not seem important to you, but makes a big difference to your reader and ultimately reflects back on you. Here are words I see confused in this class:

Than vs then: than involves a comparison. For example, the 48" lcd screen is more expensive than the 32" plasma. Then involves time and relationship. For example, go first to Costco, then go to Home Depot.

Accept vs except: accept involves receiving something. For example, please accept my apology. Except, on the other hand, means to leave out. Everyone gets to go to the ball except Cinderella.

It's vs its: it's is an abbreviation for it is. For example, it's time to write another embedded assessment. The apostrophe indicates a missing letter. "Its", on the otherhand, shows possession. For example, the cat hurt its paw when it jumped from the sky when it missed the pillow.

That's vs thats: Same story as above. That's is a contraction for that is. And that's the end of the story. "Thats" simply is not a word. Same is true of "Im". The only form you want to use is

I'm which is the contraction of I am. For example, I'm here. And, in no case do you ever want to not capitalize I when writing formally.

Principal vs principle: principal refers to first or of highest rank like the head of the school. If you think of him as your pal, you might say, "My friend is principal Goodwin." Principle refers to a rule or law. An example might be, "I read the book "The Seven Principles of Making Marriage Work".

In sum, as you write and re-write follow the rules of the road on punctuation. Clear road signs usually follow speech patterns. And carefully selected relationship words will organize your ideas to clarify the connections between them. Finally, check to be sure the word you hear is the word you want and not just a homonym—a word that sounds the same but holds a very different meaning than what you intend.