

Formal, Semi-Formal & Informal English

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Why is it important?

Would you wear this to a job interview? No, because it's too informal.



Would you wear this to the beach? No, because it's too formal.



In the same way, using English that is too formal or too informal for the situation can cause a bad impression.

Three levels of formality in English

Formal - Textbooks, official reports, academic articles, essays, business letters, contracts, official speeches

Semi-formal - Day-to-day interaction with colleagues and teachers, popular magazines/books, interviews, when talking with someone in authority or who you respect

Informal - Interacting with friends, speaking or chatting online

Formal English

1. Longer/more complex sentences

Punctuation, proper grammar, and correct sentence structure are very important. A formal sentence you might see in an academic journal:

Research has shown that learning a second language, in addition to leading to expanded career and social opportunities, can also expand the reasoning capability of the brain, although this finding is disputed by some scientists.

A less formal way to express the same idea:

Learning another language can improve your career and social life. Some people also say it can make you smarter, but others disagree.

2. Larger and less common words

A formal sentence you might see in an economic report:

The economy is currently quite robust; nevertheless, some specialists predict an imminent recession.

A simpler, less formal way to say the same thing:

The economy is very strong right now, but some specialists say we'll have a recession soon.

Some less formal words and their formal equivalents:

Less formal:	More formal:
help (n.)	assistance
buy	purchase
need	require
get	obtain
next/later	subsequently
also/plus	moreover
whole	entire
enough	sufficient

3. Avoid phrasal verbs

The price ~~went up~~.

The price **rose/increased**.

The client ~~asked for~~ a contract.

The client **requested** a contract.

The problems have ~~come back~~.

The problems have **returned**.

We will ~~cut down on~~ spending.

We will **reduce** spending.

4. Avoid contractions

I'm, you're, can't, don't, wasn't, it's...

The shipment ~~hasn't~~ arrived.

The shipment **has not** arrived.

~~**They're**~~ manufactured in China.

They are manufactured in China.

~~**He's**~~ the director of marketing.

He is the director of marketing.

~~**We'd**~~ like to inform you...

We would like to inform you...

What about this? - **The company's employees**

This is OK to use in formal English because it's a possessive, NOT a contraction! It means "The employees of the company."

With possessives, you can use either 's or "of the" - but try to avoid using "of the" multiple times in a single phrase:

the terms of the client's contract

NOT: the terms **of the** contract **of the** client

5. NO idioms, slang, text speak

Idiom: The software is **a piece of cake**.

The software is **quite user-friendly**.

The software is **extremely easy to use**.

Slang: A million **bucks** in profit.

A million **dollars** in profit.

Text speak: Tks & we look 4ward 2 meeting u.

Thanks, and we look forward to meeting you.

Also avoid shortened words:

The **info** was incomplete.

The **information** was incomplete.

~~The results have arrived from the **lab**.~~

The results have arrived from the **laboratory**.

~~fruits and **veggies**~~

fruits and **vegetables**

Semi-Formal English

1. Phrasal verbs & contractions = OK

Could you **look over** this report?

look over = review and check for errors

She **came up with** a great idea.

came up with = created, invented, thought of

I'm available on Friday morning.

The directors **weren't** happy.

To learn phrasal verbs,
take the **Phrasal Verbs**
in Conversation Course!

2. Some idioms are OK, but avoid slang and text speak

This project is **on the back burner**.

on the back burner = not a priority at the moment

We're operating **in the red**.

in the red = no money, negative cash flow

Semi-formal (inviting your boss): "Would you like to join me for lunch?"

Informal (inviting your best friend): "Hey, wanna grab a bite to eat?"

Semi-formal: "Hello, how are you?"

Informal: "Wassup?"

Semi-formal: "The conference was great!"

Informal: "It was awesome!" "It was the bomb!"

3. Use polite English

Say **"I'd like..."** instead of **"I want..."**

When making requests, use "could you" and "please," don't just give commands: Say **"Could you please call me later?"** and not just **"Call me later."**

Another part of polite English is making criticisms and negative comments in an indirect way:

~~You're wrong.~~

I'm afraid you're mistaken.

~~I disagree.~~

I'm of a different opinion. / I see it differently.

~~This is terrible work.~~

This could be improved.

~~I don't like it.~~

I don't really care for it.

It's not my cup of tea.

I'd prefer...

Informal English

1. Shorter, simpler sentences - perfect grammar is not as important

(So don't be so nervous about mistakes when speaking!)

"Have you finished your work yet?" → "Finished your work yet?"

"I'm really liking this book."

("like" should technically not be in the -ING form here)

"But I don't think so."

Starting sentences with "but," ending sentences with prepositions, using sentence fragments - these are all done in informal spoken English.

2. Expressions/exclamations

um, uh, like, lemme see... = hesitation, when you need a moment to think before speaking

- **I mean...** = to clarify
- **...you know?** = to check if the other person understands
- **Gotcha.** = I understand
- **How come?** = Why?
- **Yeah right.** = a sarcastic way to say "I don't believe you."
- **I'll say!** = I definitely agree with you
- **wow!** = surprise
- **oops** = accident
- **yuck** = that's disgusting

3. Phrasal verbs, slang, and idioms are used VERY frequently

This is one reason that watching movies and TV shows in English is difficult... even if you have good vocabulary and grammar! You may not have learned the phrasal verbs, slang, and idioms in your textbook.

Phrasal verb: "I won't **put up with** this!"

put up with = tolerate

Idiom: "Could you **give me a hand**?"

give me a hand = help me

Slang: "I **aced** the test!"

aced = got an excellent grade

The [Phrasal Verbs in Conversation Course](#) and the [English Idioms Course](#) can help you learn these expressions in context!

4. Reductions when speaking (in both semi-formal and informal English)

He's **gonna** be angry.

gonna = going to

I **wanna** learn how to ski.

wanna = want to

Didja like the movie?

didja = did you

We **hafta** leave now.

hafta = have to

I bought apples **n** grapes.

n = and

Courses to help you learn:

Business English Course - Focuses on formal and semi-formal English used in meetings, presentations, interviews, letters and e-mails, and vocabulary for jobs and careers.

Everyday English Speaking Course - Daily situations, socializing, phrases, expressions not found in textbooks, how native English speakers say things in real life.

Phrasal Verbs in Conversation - Teaches phrasal verbs in context, through dialogues, making it easier to learn and understand them. Quizzes and writing exercises help you put the phrasal verbs into practice immediately.

Thanks for attending!

Examples of more formal / less formal words:

Less Formal	More Formal
a lot of	many, much, numerous, a great deal of
about	regarding
after that	thereafter
also / plus	moreover
answer	respond
ask for	request

at first	initially
better	superior, improved
breathing	respiration
buy	purchase
cheap	inexpensive
drink	beverage
eat	consume
end	terminate, complete
enough	sufficient
fix	repair
get	obtain, acquire
help	assist, assistance
home	residence
in the end	finally, ultimately
I've got to / I have to	I must, It is necessary for me to
kind of / sort of	rather, somewhat
leave	depart
let	permit
live	reside
lively	animated
need	require, necessity/requirement
next/later	subsequently
OK / all right	acceptable, satisfactory
old	elderly
people	persons, individuals
people say that...	it is said that...
right away	immediately

seem	appear
show	demonstrate
so	therefore, thus, consequently
start	begin, commence
start again	resume
stop	cease
sweat	perspire, perspiration
tell	inform
that's why	therefore
try	attempt
very, really	quite
want	desire, would like, wish
watch	observe
whole	entire
work	function
wrong	incorrect
you (<i>generic</i>)	one, everyone