

- » Distinguishing between formal and informal language
- » Choosing the correct level of formality in speaking and writing

Chapter **1**

Tailoring Language to Suit Your Audience and Purpose

When it comes to language, one size does *not* fit all. The way you tell an Authority Figure (teacher, boss, emperor, whatever) about an app you invented differs from the way you explain your brainchild to a friend. If you're like most people, you probably switch levels of formality automatically, dozens of times a day. But sometimes you may find yourself wondering how to express yourself, especially in emails, texts, and tweets. If you hit the wrong note, your message may not receive the reaction you'd hoped for. Very few investors react positively to someone who writes, "Yo, want in on this?" Nor will you find it easy to get a date if you ask, "Would you consider dining with me at an informal Italian restaurant that offers relatively good pizza?" In this chapter you practice identifying levels of formality and examine situations in which each is appropriate.

Climbing the Ladder of Language Formality

Proper English is important. The only problem with that statement is the definition of “proper.” Language has many levels of formality, all of which are “proper” at times and completely unsuitable at others. Many gradations of formality exist, but to make things easier, I divide English into three large categories: what I call “friendspeak” (the most casual), “conversational” (one step up), and “formal” (the equivalent of wearing your best business attire). Take a look at these examples:

c u in 10 (friendspeak)

There in ten minutes. (conversational)

I will arrive in ten minutes. (formal)

All three statements say the same thing in very different ways. Here’s the deal:

» **Friendspeak** breaks some rules of formal English on purpose, to show that people are comfortable with each other. Friendspeak shortens or drops words and often includes slang and references that only close friends understand. (That’s why I call it “*friendspeak*.”) No one has to teach you this level of English. You learn it from your pals, or you create it yourself and teach it to your buddies.

» **Conversational English** sounds relaxed, but not too relaxed. It’s the language equivalent of jeans and a T-shirt. Conversational English is filled with contractions (*I’m* instead of *I am*, *would’ve* instead of *would have*, and so forth). Not many abbreviations appear in conversational English, but you may confidently include those that are well established and widely understood (*etc.*, *a.m.*, *p.m.*, and the like). You may also see acronyms, which pluck the first letter from each word of a name (*NATO* for the *North Atlantic Treaty Organization* or *AIDS* for *Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome*, for example). Conversational English may drop some words and break a few rules. The example sentence for conversational English at the beginning of this section, for instance, has no subject or verb, a giant no-no in formal writing but perfectly acceptable at this level of language.

» **Formal English** is the pickiest location in Grammarland. When you speak or write in formal English, you follow every rule (including some you never heard of), avoid slang and abbreviations, and trot out your best vocabulary.

Think about your audience when you’re selecting friendspeak, conversational English, or formal English. What impression are you trying to give? Let your goals guide you. Also consider the situation. At work you may rely on conversational English when you run into your boss at the coffee machine, but not when you’re submitting a quarterly report. At school, choosing conversational English is okay for a teacher–student chat in the cafeteria, but not for homework. More on situation and language appears in the next section, “Matching Message to Situation.”

Can you identify levels of formality? Before you hit the questions, check out this example:



Q. Place these expressions in order of formality, from the most formal to the least. Note: Two expressions may tie. For example, your answer may be A, B and C — in which case expression A is the most formal and expressions B and C are on the same, more casual level.

- A.** sketchy block
- B.** That is a dangerous neighborhood.
- C.** Where gangs rule.

A. B, C, A. Expression B is the most formal because it follows all the conventions of English. Every word is in the dictionary, and the sentence is complete. (See Chapter 3 for more practice with complete sentences.) Expression C, on the other hand, is an incomplete sentence and is therefore less formal. Also, in Expression C the verb *rule* has an unusual meaning. Your readers or listeners probably understand that gangs aren't official authorities but instead wield a lot of unofficial power. The statement is more conversational than formal. Expression A employs slang (*sketchy* means "slightly dangerous"), so it's closer to friendspeak than to formal English.

1

- A.** regarding your proposal
- B.** in reference to your proposal
- C.** about that idea

2

- A.** like, earlier
- B.** heretofore
- C.** until now

3

- A.** Please do not abbreviate.
- B.** abbreevs not ok
- C.** I prefer that you write the entire word when you text me.

4

- A.** Awkward!!!!
- B.** Your behavior disturbs me.
- C.** Calm down, guys!

5

- A. Are you into electronic dance music?
- B. edm 2nite?
- C. Tonight that club features electronic dance music. Would you care to go?

6

- A. M left J's FOMO
- B. Mike left John's house when he got a text from Fran about her party.
- C. M = gone FOMO F's party

7

- A. #newbaby #thanxmom #notkillingmewhenIcriedallnight
- B. Dead tired. Baby cried all night. Feeling grateful to my mom.
- C. Now that I'm caring for my new baby, I am grateful to my mother for tolerating me when I was an infant.

8

- A. In retrospect, jumping into the pool blindfolded was foolish.
- B. broken ankle but YOLO
- C. No water in the pool. Who knew? Broken ankle!

9

- A. 2G2BT
- B. 4real?
- C. u sure?

10

- A. ATM card not working.
- B. My bank card was rejected.
- C. ATM?!?!?

Matching Message to Situation

When you're listening or reading, you probably note the difference between formal and informal language constantly — maybe unconsciously. Knowing levels of language, however, isn't enough. You also need to decide what level of formality to employ when you're speaking and writing. Before you choose, consider these factors:

- » **Your audience.** If your message is going to a person with more power or higher status than you (an employee writing to a boss or a student to a teacher, for example), you should probably be more formal. If you're speaking or writing to someone with less power or lower status than you, conversational English is fine. In a higher-to-lower situation, however, the person with more authority may wish to employ formal English in order to serve as a role model or to establish a professional atmosphere. When you're dealing with peers, conversational English is a good bet. Only your closest friends rate — and understand — friendspeak.
- » **The situation.** At the company picnic or in the cafeteria, most people opt for less formal speech. Similarly, at get-togethers with family and friends, formal language may sound stiff and unfriendly. When you're in an official meeting with a client or teacher, however, formal English is safer.
- » **The format.** When you're speaking you have more leeway than when you're writing. Why? Unless you're reading prepared remarks, you probably can't produce perfect sentences. Not many people can! The writing in texts, tweets, and instant messages tends to be in conversational English or, with your buddies, in friendspeak. Exceptions occur, though. A text to a client should be more formal than one to a friend, and journalists or officials often tweet in formal English. Email can go either way. Because it's fast, the dropped or shortened forms of conversational English are generally acceptable, but if you think the reader expects you to honor tradition (the written equivalent of a curtsy or a hat-tip), go for formal English. Always employ formal English for business letters, school reports, and similar paper-based communication.

Listen to those around you or read others' work that appears in the same context you're navigating. Unless you want to stand out, aim for the same level of formality you hear or see.



EXAMPLE

Think about the audience, situation, and format. In the following example, decide whether the writing or speech is appropriate or inappropriate.

Q. Text from a department head to the CEO requesting a salary increase:

greenlight \$20K or I walk

A. Inappropriate. Think about the power ladder here. The CEO is on the top rung, and the department head somewhere farther down. Even though texts tend to be informal, this one is about money. When you ask for money, be polite! To be polite in Grammarland is to use formal, correct language. The department head should have written something like "If you cannot raise my salary by \$20,000, I will seek employment elsewhere."

11 Email from student to professor about the assigned reading of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*:

Best. Play. Ever.

12 Chat between friends:

There's this prince, he's named Hamlet. He's freaking out about his mother's marriage to his uncle only a couple of months after Hamlet's father died.

- 13 Portion of an essay about the play, written as a homework assignment:

The Queen's new husband is not a sympathetic character. Dude, he's a murderer!

- 14 Cover letter from a job applicant to a potential employer, a tech start-up:

Attached please find my resume, pursuant to your advertisement of July 15th.

- 15 Instant messages between classmates, discussing their grades:

A+!!!

sick

ttyl

ok bfn

- 16 Portion of a letter to the editor of the town paper from a citizen:

The lack of a stoplight on that corner has led to several car crashes. The city council is right to think about the expense of installing one, but what about the cost of human life and suffering?

- 17 Comment on social media post about a tax to finance improved traffic flow:

You morons should stop stealing our money. We coulda bought five stoplights made outta gold for the amount of money you spent on office furniture. To conclude, shut up!

- 18 Email to the mother of a potential tutoring client:

I have an advanced degree in mathematics and many years of experience teaching algebra. My rates are on a par with those of other tutors in the area. Also, I get along well with kids!

- 19 Tweet from the president to the members of the local garden association:

Meeting tonight at 8 p.m. #springplanting

- 20 Speech by the class president to fellow students at graduation:

We made it! We're out of this place! But Roger and May are gonna totally ship anyway!

Answers to “Tailoring Language to Suit Your Audience and Purpose”

In this section you find all the answers you’re looking for. Well, maybe not the answers to “What is the meaning of life?” or “Why is the sky blue?” but definitely the right responses to the questions in this chapter.

- 1 **A and B, C.** Both A and B are formal English expressions. Each employs businesslike vocabulary (*regarding*, *proposal*, and *in reference to*). Expression C takes the formality level down a notch, substituting *idea* for *proposal* and *about* for *regarding* and *in reference to*.
- 2 **B, C, A.** Expression B sounds fancy, and it is. You find *heretofore* in legal documents and in many other types of formal English writing. (It means “before this time,” by the way.) Expression C is something you probably hear and say all the time. It’s conversational. Expression A might be conversational without *like*, but adding that little word puts this one in the friendspeak category.
- 3 **C, A, B.** Expression C hits the top of the formal meter, and B is at the bottom. (You probably already guessed that *abreevs* isn’t a real word. Also, B breaks its own rule by including *ok* instead of *okay*.) In between expressions C and B is A, which is grammatically correct without being stuffy.
- 4 **B, C, A.** Expression B is a complete sentence, and so is C. But *guys* isn’t formal, so C slips into conversational English. Expression A pops up in friendspeak, whenever someone does something impolite or embarrassing. The four exclamation points (three too many in standard, formal English) also situate this one in friendspeak.
- 5 **C, A, B.** Expression C features two complete sentences, and every word is in the dictionary. Expression A is also a complete sentence, but asking if someone is *into* this type of music (or anything else) brings slang to the sentence. Slang is never formal. Expression B has an abbreviation (*edm* = electronic dance music) and a “word” (*znite*, or “tonight”) that is okay only when you’re texting, and sometimes not even then.
- 6 **B, A and C.** Both expressions A and C are written in friendspeak. They use abbreviations and an acronym: *M* and *J*’s stand for names — probably *Mike* and *John*’s — and *FOMO*, which is “fear of missing out.” This usage shows up only in the least formal situations, usually texts between friends. Expression B is a full sentence with all the words written correctly and completely.
- 7 **C, B, A.** Expression C explains the speaker’s situation in clear, Standard English. Expression B has half-sentences (probably because the speaker is sleep-deprived), so it’s less formal, in the category of conversational English. Expression A, with its hashtags (the # sign) is the sort of communication only friends will appreciate. It’s written in friendspeak.
- 8 **A, C, B.** Expression A is a complete sentence and employs some sophisticated vocabulary (*retrospect*). It’s formal English. Expression C has incomplete sentences (*No water in the pool* and *broken ankle*). The one complete sentence is a humorous, short comment (*Who knew?*). For these reasons, C stands for conversational English here. Expression B is friendspeak; *YOLO* is an acronym for “you only live once.”
- 9 **A and B and C.** Did I catch you here? All three of these texts are in friendspeak. Expression A expresses doubt with an abbreviation for “too good to be true.” Expression B asks if something is “for real.” Expression C also asks for confirmation, saying, “Are you sure?”

- 10 **B, A, C.** Expression B is a complete, correct sentence, so it's formal English. Expression A drops a couple of words, so it's more conversational. Expression C makes sense only if you know that the person who texted this stops for cash often and freaks out when the card doesn't work. It's friendspeak (and maybe a request for a loan!).
- 11 **Inappropriate.** Professors and teachers aren't your friends. They're in charge of your education. English teachers in particular — even the ones who show up in class wearing jeans and sneakers — value language. True, the message may appeal, because English teachers tend to think that everything they assign is worthy material. However, the message may fail (and the student also) if the teacher expects formal language.
- 12 **Appropriate.** This chat is a good example of conversational English that's perfectly fine. The friends are conversing — your first clue. They break a few rules, such as illegally stringing together two complete sentences: *There's this prince, he's named Hamlet.*
- 13 **Inappropriate.** Homework assignments have no room in them for *Dude*, unless you're writing fiction and a character says that word. The first sentence establishes a formal tone; the second sentence should match, not lower, the level of formality.
- 14 **Inappropriate.** Surprised? Job applicants should be formal, but they should also avoid out-dated expressions and overly stuffy language, especially for a tech start-up where innovation and rule-breaking are valued. "Attached please find" should be "Attached is." "Pursuant to" would be better as "in response to."
- 15 **Appropriate.** This one's in friendspeak, entirely proper for two pals sending information quickly via instant messages. Translated for those who need actual words, this exchange reads as follows:
- Friend 1: I got an A+.
- Friend 2: That's great. (*Sick* is slang for "excellent, wonderful.")
- Friend 1: I will talk to you later. (The first letter of each word creates this expression.)
- Friend 2: All right (or okay). Bye for now.
- 16 **Appropriate.** This paragraph is quite formal, and its purpose is to persuade readers that a stoplight is needed. To convince someone, you want to sound informed, sane, and thoughtful. Formal English fills that slot!
- 17 **Inappropriate.** Social media has a reputation as an "anything goes" sort of medium, but before you post, think about your purpose. Who would pay attention to this writer? To persuade someone not to tax, or to persuade someone of anything, you need a real argument, not just a set of insults like *morons*, *stealing*, and *shut up*. Proper grammar isn't essential, but if your goal is to be taken seriously, mistakes such as *coulda* (instead of *could have*) and *outta* (instead of *out of*) don't help.
- 18 **Appropriate.** Job applicants usually want to sound competent, and those seeking teaching roles should be even more formal than others. Why? Because language in academic situations is generally formal. You may have wondered about the last sentence, which includes the informal term *kids*. Here, the writer breaks into conversational English, but with a reason: to show that the writer can relate to and be comfortable with the child to be tutored.
- 19 **Appropriate.** Tweets may have no more than 280 characters, so the number of spaces, letters, and symbols can't go above that number. Dropping words is fine in this format, as is directing people who are interested in attending the meeting to other tweets about spring planting.
- 20 **Inappropriate.** Unless you're in a school that prizes informality to an extreme degree (and those places do exist), a graduation speech should be something that appeals to the entire audience. Roger, May, and the speaker may know that *ship* means to be in a romantic relationship, but Roger's grandmother probably doesn't.