

- » Recognizing the difference 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

Suppose you invented a video game. The way you tell a teacher or boss about the game differs from the way you explain it to friends. If you're like most people, you probably switch levels of formality easily, dozens of times a day. But sometimes, you may find yourself wondering how to express yourself. If you hit the wrong note, your message may not receive the reaction you want. Very few investors would say yes 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 identify 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" in some situations and

completely wrong in others. To make things simple, I think of English as divided into three large categories: what I call “friendspeak” (the most casual), “conversational” (one step up), and “formal,” “Standard” English. Take a look at these examples:

c u in 10 (friendspeak)

There in ten minutes. (conversational English)

I will arrive in ten minutes. (Standard English)

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

- » **Friendspeak** breaks some rules of Standard 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). Abbreviations appear in conversational English, but only those that are widely understood (*etc.*, *a.m.*, *p.m.*, and the like). You may also see acronyms, which come from the first letter of 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 sample 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.
- » **Standard English** is the most formal. It follows every rule (including some you never heard of) and avoids slang and abbreviations.

Think about your audience when you’re selecting friendspeak, conversational English, or Standard 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 try the questions, check out this example:



YOUR TURN

- 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 or 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. sus 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 rules of Standard English. Every word is in the dictionary, and the sentence is complete. (See Chapter 8 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 have a lot of unofficial power. The statement is less formal than in Standard English. Expression A employs slang (*sus* means "suspicious, maybe dangerous"), so it fits into the friendspeak category.

1

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

2

- A. earlier, bro
- B. heretofore
- C. until now

3

- A. Please don't abbreviate.
- B. abbreves not ok
- C. I prefer that you write the entire word.

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 #thnxbmom #notkillingmewhenIcriedallnight
- B. Super 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 notice the difference between formal and informal language. Recognizing levels of language, however, isn't enough. You also must select a level of formality to express yourself. 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 choose formal English in order to serve as a role model or to establish a professional atmosphere. When you're dealing with equals, 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 speak less formally. In the same way, at get-togethers with family and friends, formal language may sound too stiff. In an official meeting with a client or teacher, however, Standard English — the most formal choice — is best.



» **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 Standard English. Always employ Standard English for business letters and reports and school assignments.



TIP

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.



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

YOUR TURN

**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, do so in Standard English. 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's a murderer!

14 Cover letter from a job applicant to a potential employer:  
Attached please find my resume, pursuant to your advertisement of July 15th.

15 Texts 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 a 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 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! We're gonna be great, especially Roger. He's got rizz!

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

In this section, you will 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 answers to the questions in this chapter.

- 1 **A and B, C.** Both A and B are formal English expressions. Each employs businesslike vocabulary (*regarding your proposal*, and *in reference to*). Expression C takes the formality level down a little, 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 *bro* (a slang term for friend), 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 *abreets* 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 (which is three too many in Standard English) also marks this one as 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” (*2nite*, or “tonight”) that is okay only when you’re texting friends. (For more about texting, see Chapter 13.)
- 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 needs sleep!), so it’s less formal in the category of conversational English. Expression A, using only hashtags (the # sign) is the least formal.
- 8 **A, C, B.** Expression A is a complete sentence and employs some advanced vocabulary. (*Retrospect* means “a review of the past.”) It’s the most formal. 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 represents conversational English. Expression B is the least formal, for friends only. *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 informal, what I think of as 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 the most formal. Expression A drops a couple of words, as you would in conversation. 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. This is clearly the least formal.
- 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 great. However, the message may fail (and the student also) if the teacher expects Standard English.
- 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.** Job applicants should be formal, but they should also avoid old-fashioned expressions like “pursuant to.” “In response to” is more suitable wording. “Attached please find” should be “Attached is.”
- 15 **Appropriate.** This one's entirely fine for friends texting each other. 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 and thoughtful. Standard 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.** Dropping words is fine in tweets, as is *#springplanting*, a tag that directs people who are interested in attending the meeting to other tweets about spring planting.
- 20 **Inappropriate.** Unless you're in a school that is proud of breaking the rules (and those places do exist), a graduation speech should be something that appeals to the entire audience. The graduates may know that *rizz* means to be attractive, but some in the audience will be puzzled.