

FORMAL AND INFORMAL ENGLISH

Malcolm Venter

(Originally written as part of the Study Guide for the 2017 English Olympiad)

Correctness and appropriateness

Users of a language need to be able to use their language 'correctly' – that is, in terms of the grammatical rules of the language.

They also need to be able to use it 'appropriately' – that is, in a way that it suits the context.

Thus one can have language usage which is 'correct', but not appropriate.

One of the main aspects of appropriateness is the *level of formality* of the language usage.

Range of tolerance

An important point to note about formal and informal language is that there are not just two watertight categories, 'formal' vs 'informal'. Instead what we have is a continuum – a sliding scale – from VERY FORMAL to VERY INFORMAL:

VERY INFORMAL <i>Intimate</i> E.g. Chats / emails among good friends	SEMI-FORMAL <i>Casual</i> E.g. Chats between parents and children; emails to parents	FORMAL <i>Less casual</i> E.g. Talking to the principal, the doctor; letter of application	VERY FORMAL E.g. Acts of parliament, insurance contracts, investing of a President, wills
--	---	---	--

This variation in the use of language results in what we call **registers**. We can define a register for our purposes as: *A variety of language based on the degree of formality of the context in which it is used.*

Context

What are the factors in the context which result in the differences? There are three main ones:

1. **WHO** is communicating with whom?
2. **WHERE** are they communicating?
3. **WHY** are they communicating?

Let us have a look at each of these factors in turn.

WHO is communicating?

This depends on the *relationship* between the communicators, which has been described as follows:

Relationships in fact vary along a continuum, from close to remote. At the one end are husbands, wives, children, parents and other intimates, and at the other end the Queen or the President, perhaps, with acquaintances and senior and junior colleagues spaced out appropriately along the way.

So here again you see not just two extremes, but a continuum.

This relationship is determined by two factors:

STATUS – subordinate or superior on social scale / in work situation	LEVEL OF FAMILIARITY – how well they know each other
---	---

WHERE are they communicating?

This depends on *situation* in which one is communicating:

MORE FORMAL PLACE (e.g. classroom)	LESS FORMAL PLACE (e.g. playground)
---	--

WHY are they communicating?

Two questions are relevant here:

1. Is the purpose serious (e.g. an exam)?	2. Is the purpose less serious (e.g. chatting)?
--	--

Vocabulary differences

The words we choose as a result of these three factors once again reflect the continuum we mentioned earlier:

VERY INFORMAL <i>Intimate</i> Colloquial language / colloquialisms; slang /slangisms	SEMI-FORMAL <i>Casual</i> Colloquial language / colloquialisms	FORMAL <i>Less casual</i> General vocabulary which does not include colloquial language / colloquialisms or slang /slangisms	VERY FORMAL <i>Distant</i> Big / technical words
---	---	---	--

Here are some examples of **formal** vs **colloquial** vocabulary:

FORMAL	COLLOQUIAL
child	kid
device	contraption

The distinction between **slang** and **colloquial** is not always clear, but there are some differences:

- Slang is highly informal; colloquialisms are less informal.
- Colloquialisms are more acceptable than slang in a wider social context.
- Slang is usually short-lived – but some items do stick.
- Slang is often limited to a group - when it spreads beyond the group that originally uses it, its original users often replace it with other, less recognised, terms to maintain group identity.

Where does slang come from?

1. NEW WORDS	Examples: bonkers – mad, crazy lank (dated SAE) – adj: good, fantastic; adv: very
2. NEW MEANINGS FOR EXISTING WORDS	Examples: bunk / do a bunk – abscond from school or work cool – fantastic
3. NEW PHRASES	Examples: big shot – person of high rank or importance muffin top – bulging bare midriff
4. NEW ABBREVIATIONS:	Examples: aggro (noun) – aggressive behaviour arb – arbitrary, nothing special
5. BORROWING FROM OTHER LANGUAGES	Examples: muti – medicine (isiXhosa) bangbroek – coward, ‘scaredy cat’ (Afrikaans)

Using registers

No register is right or wrong in itself nor better than any other, but one is more *appropriate* than another. It all depends on the *context*. Society – and sometimes cultures – expects you to use the appropriate register. Using slang, for example, is fine when relaxing with friends, but include it in a job application letter and don’t hold your breath waiting for a positive answer.

The same applies to how one dresses and behaves – the different contexts expect different types of clothing and behaviour.

Exercise on registers: What kind of English for what type of writing?

There is no single ‘correct’ or ‘incorrect’ type of language. It all depends on the situation and the purpose of the communication. Inappropriate style will ‘miss’ your target readers because you have not understood the purpose of the text you are writing. It is essential that you use a style that is appropriate for your audience, and that you fully understand the purpose of the text you are writing.

Study the texts below (all the correspondence is imaginary!). Do you consider the style appropriate? Give reasons for your opinion. Use the table at the end of the activity to assist you.

a) Hi, Prof, This was an awesome assignment. I am looking forward to getting the BEST marks ever. *(Comment written on the back page of a University student' assignment cover).*

b) The Department of Higher Education plans to open new universities in rural areas. This is seen as a part of an initiative to bring education to people who do not have access to tertiary educational facilities. However, this essay will argue that this plan will be to the disadvantage of existing universities, all of which are experiencing financial and academic difficulties. *(Introduction to an argumentative essay).*

c) Thank you, thank you, for accepting my registration. I promise to work hard and never let you down. I can't tell you how grateful I am after being turned down by six other universities! *(Written to the registrar of a university in response to a letter informing the student that his/her application has been successful).*

d) I am in receipt of your communication of 11 February and wish to express my deepest gratitude for the invaluable confidence you have afforded me by accepting my application to be registered as a student at your respected institution of higher learning. *(Written to the registrar of a university in response to a letter informing the student that his/her application has been successful).*

e) Hey, my bro, I wanna tune u abt the mark u gave me. *Eish! (Email to a teacher).*

f) I have pleasure in informing you that your application to be admitted to the degree of Bachelor of Science has been successful. *(Letter to a student from the registrar of a university).*

g) Dear Mother, It is with pleasure that I wish to announce that I received correspondence from the University of Cape Town, informing me that my application was successful. I wish to take this opportunity to express my sincere gratitude for the support and affection that you have given me in the course of the eighteen years of my existence. *(Letter from a student to his/her mother).*

h) Hey, jabu, i made it! Gonna be a student @ UCT! Awesome ☺! Wot r u doin 2nite? Wana have a lekka jol @ my place? *(Message from a student to his friend)*

Text	Its intended reader	Its intended purpose	Is it appropriate or inappropriate?	Reason?
a)				
b)				
c)				
d)				
e)				
f)				
g)				
h)				