ENGLISH, LITERACY, AND COMMUNICATION

Formal versus informal language

Difficulty level: Intermediate

English, Literacy, and Communication

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Overview of the concept

This is how you choose the right words for the moment, so a job application or an email to a teacher sounds respectful while a text to a friend sounds natural. The same message lands very differently depending on the words you pick, and the wrong tone can cost you a job, a mark, or a good first impression. Knowing when to be formal and when to relax helps you write cover letters, speak to a boss or a customer, and still sound like yourself with your friends.



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Rule

Formal versus informal language: formal language uses full, polite words, no slang, and no shortcuts. Informal language uses short, casual words and slang.

Match the words to the situation: formal for a job application or an email to a teacher, informal for a text to a friend.

Worked examples

EXAMPLE 1

Q Rewrite formally: 'Hey, gimme that book, ok?'

SOLUTION

Identify the situation: asking someone for a book politely.

Replace slang and shortcuts with full, polite words.

So: 'Could you please pass me that book?'

EXAMPLE 2

Q Rewrite informally (to a friend): 'Could you please pass me that book?'

SOLUTION

Identify the situation: talking to a friend, relaxed.

Use short, casual words.

So: 'Hey, can you pass me that book?'

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Practice questions

1 Rewrite formally: 'Wanna hang out later?'

- **A** Wanna hang out later, dude?
- **B** Would you like to spend time together later?
- **C** You wanna hang out or what?
- **D** Hang out later, yeah?

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2 Rewrite informally: 'I would be grateful if you could assist me.'

- **A** I would be grateful for your assistance.
- **B** Might I request your help, please?
- **C** Can you help me, please?
- **D** I hereby ask for your assistance.

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3 Rewrite formally: 'Thanks a bunch, dude!' (to a teacher)

- A Thank you very much!
- B Thanks a bunch!
- C Cheers, dude!
- D Thanks a ton, man!

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4 Rewrite informally: 'I am writing to inform you that I will be late.' (to a friend)

- A I am writing to inform you of my lateness.
- B Please be advised that I shall be late.
- C I regret to inform you that I will be delayed.
- D Hey, I will be late.

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5 Rewrite formally: 'Yeah, whatever, I guess.' (to a teacher, agreeing)

- **A** Yeah, sure, whatever.
- **B** Yes, I agree.
- **C** I guess so, yeah.
- **D** Whatever, fine by me.

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6 Rewrite informally: 'Please be advised that the meeting is cancelled.' (to a friend)

- **A** Hey, the meeting is cancelled.
- **B** Please be advised the meeting has been cancelled.
- **C** I am writing to advise you of the cancellation.
- **D** Kindly note the meeting is cancelled.

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7 Rewrite formally: 'Gotta go, see ya!' (in a school email)

- **A** Gotta run, see ya later!
- **B** Catch ya later, gotta go!
- **C** I have to go. Goodbye.
- **D** See ya, I'm outta here!

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8 Rewrite informally: 'I regret to inform you that I cannot attend.' (to a friend)

- **A** I regret that I am unable to attend.
- **B** Please accept my regrets; I cannot attend.
- **C** I am writing to inform you I cannot attend.
- **D** Sorry, I can't come.

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9 Rewrite formally: 'That test was awesome!' (in a school report)

- **A** That test was awesome, man!
- **B** That test was excellent.
- **C** That test rocked!
- **D** That test was so cool!

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10 Rewrite informally: 'I hereby request your assistance.' (to a friend)

- **A** Can you help me?
- **B** I hereby request your assistance with this matter.
- **C** May I formally request your help?
- **D** I would be grateful if you could assist me.

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ANSWER KEY

1. Would you like to spend time together later?
2. Can you help me, please?
3. Thank you very much!
4. Hey, I will be late.
5. Yes, I agree.
6. Hey, the meeting is cancelled.
7. I have to go. Goodbye.
8. Sorry, I can't come.
9. That test was excellent.
10. Can you help me?

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