



Formal & Informal Register in Academic Writing

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MINISTERSTVO ŠKOLSTVÍ,
MLÁDEŽE A TĚLOVÝCHOVY



OP Vzdělávání
pro konkurenceschopnost



INVESTICE
DO ROZVOJE
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Formal & Informal Register – Part 1

Q. What are the features of academic writing?

- Writing for the reader/audience
- Fulfilling the purpose
- Genre recognition
- Clear structure and organisation
- Relevance
- Cohesion & coherence
- Use of a variety of grammatical sentences
- Absence of colloquialisms/slang/idioms

Phrasal Verbs

- Phrasal verbs are idiomatic expressions comprising of a verb and particle (preposition or adverb)
- Meanings vary, even with the same verb, e.g.:
 - put up – to accommodate
 - put up with – to tolerate
 - put down – to criticise
- These are very common in spoken English...but avoid phrasal verbs in academic writing

Exercise 1: Phrasal Verbs

- Replace the phrasal verbs in the 10 sentences in **Exercise 1** of your handout with a more formal equivalent.
- Ensure you do not change the semantic value of the sentence.

Collocation

- Words which commonly co-occur to form meaning by association are called ***collocates***
- The more general the word, the broader its collocational range (= weak collocates) and the greater the specificity, the more limited the collocations (= strong collocates)
- Words used in different senses have a larger number of associations, and therefore a broader range of collocates (i.e. for each sense)

Blankety-Blank...

- kith and kin = strong cotton shirt = weak
- curly hair = weak digital camera = strong
- *fast* food...**not** *quick* food...
- a *quick* shower...**not** a *fast* shower...

Look at the words below and think of a collocate...

- salt and....
- ...cream
- blond...
- very...

Exercise 2: Collocations

- Look at the sentences in **Exercise 2**.
- Replace the italicised part of each sentence with a formal single verb equivalent that does not alter the meaning of the sentence.
- **Before choosing the verb, identify the word with which the replacement should collocate...**

Exercise 3: Colloquialisms

- Colloquial English is idiomatic, informal and conversational.
- Formal register should therefore not contain the use of colloquialisms.
- Find a suitable alternative for the colloquial expressions italicised in **Exercise 3**.

Exercises 4 & 5: In/Formal Style

- Informal writing has certain features which are common (e.g.: contractions, direct questions...)
- Recognising the features of formal and informal styles of English is imperative for a good writer
- Discuss the items listed in exercise 4 with a partner. You have 5 minutes.
- Now, rewrite the sentences given in Exercise 5.

Formal & Informal Register – Part 2

[adapted from Jordan (1999) Academic Writing Course]

- Look at the sentences below:
 - I showed that his arguments did not hold water.
 - It has been proved that the arguments so far are without foundation.
- *Are the following sentences formal or informal..?*

Formal or Informal? Written or Spoken?

1. Let's look at it differently.
2. I wonder why she put up with those awful conditions for such a long time.
3. Additional tests will be necessary before the experiment can be concluded.
4. It is possible to consider the argument from a different viewpoint.
5. The report is quite bad - you should really change it.

Which of the following passages is more formal?

[A] Mrs Vine tended to handle the monetary side of the business and Mr Vine took care of the workshop, purchasing, marketing and sales. Both of them worked in the store during the day and between them they managed to share the running of the business. However, Mr Vine's first love was helping out in the workshop.

...or this one?

[B] Mrs Vine controlled the financial aspects of the business, while Mr Vine managed the purchasing, marketing and sales. Both worked in the store during the day and ran business operations together. However, Mr Vine was fundamentally a craftsman and was keen to assist in the workshop whenever the opportunity arose.

Exercise 6: Again, which is more formal - A or B?

[A] The Birmingham Furniture Company (BFC) was set up in 1972 and until recently, it was a fairly profitable business. In 1999, its sales turnover averaged £15,000 per week. Given that it operates a 200% mark up (quite normal in furniture retailing), its £7,500 of weekly overheads were easily covered. The owners, Mr and Mrs Vine, have always believed that much of their success has been due to the incentive scheme they operate; the 2% on all sales provided a carrot of about £300 per week for the 6 members of staff.

Exercise 6: Again, which is more formal - A or B?

[B] The Birmingham Furniture Company (BFC) was established in 1972 and for many years had continued to grow into a reasonably profitable business. By 1999, its average weekly turnover had risen to £15,000 against overheads of £7,500, with a sales markup of 200%. The owners and founders, Mr and Mrs Vine, laid great stress on their incentive scheme and this, they believed, contributed to the success of the company. Each of the six members of staff were paid 2% commission on all sales. In 1999, this provided them with an extra £300 to share between them.

*The sentences in Exercise 7 are all informal.
Rewrite them in a formal style:*

1. She said it wasn't good enough.

It was reported to be unsatisfactory.

2. I thought the lecture was terribly difficult to follow.

The lecture was extremely difficult to understand.

3. The results were a lot better than I expected.

The results exceeded my expectations.

4. None of the other students knew the answer either.

The answer was also unknown to the other students.

5. His friends said, 'It's hell writing your dissertation!'

It was stated that several students were experiencing substantial difficulties in writing their dissertations.

Recognising Language Styles

[adapted from Jordan (1999) Academic Writing Course]

Pair-work: Five definitions of 'education' are listed in **Exercise 8**. Each one is in a different style: Decide if it is **spoken** or **written** and then match it with the sources listed at the end...

1b

2e

3d

4c

5a

Cautious Language (Hedging)

[adapted from Jordan (1999) Academic Writing Course]

- Look at the two sentences below:
 1. A survey has shown that lecturers use the terms ‘seminars’ and ‘tutorials’ interchangeably.
 2. A survey has shown that many lecturers tend to use the terms ‘seminars’ and ‘tutorials’ interchangeably.
- Definite/generalised > cautious

Now work through Exercise 9...

1. **(There is an assumption that)** Interest Rates will **may** not rise further this year.
2. **It is often said that/Perhaps** reading is most effective when it has a particular purpose.
3. The answer to problems is **often** found in asking the right questions.
4. **Many** countries **tend to** disagree on the interpretation of democracy.

Inappropriate Language

Read the extract in **Exercise 10** on your handout. Identify the informal and/or inappropriate features of the passages and rewrite the paragraphs in a more suitable academic style...

Possible rewrite...

- Research has shown (James) that learners of English find writing the most difficult thing they've got to do. There are 3 main types of error that the learner will make.
- **Recent** research (James, 2004) **suggests** that learners of English **appear to** find writing the most **challenging skill to master**. There are three main types of error that the learners **frequently** make.
- The biggest sort of error leads to misunderstanding or a total breakdown in communication. There are lots of causes of this: usually translating word for word **the student** uses the wrong sentence patterns (grammar) and the wrong words (vocabulary).
- The **most serious** errors lead to misunderstandings or a total **failure** in communication. There are **many** causes of this, **with literal translations from the first language being the most common**. **By** translating each word separately, the student **may use incorrect** grammar and **inappropriate vocabulary**.

Possible rewrite...

- Another cause is choosing to write long and complicated sentences with far too many supplementary clauses. The longer the sentence, the bigger is the chance of making mistakes and failing to communicate the meaning.
- Another cause is choosing to write long, complex sentences with **an excessive number of subordinate** clauses. **Such sentences increase the likelihood** of making mistakes and failing to communicate the meaning.
- Therefore, in the early stages of your writing, you shouldn't write sentences longer than 3 lines.
- Therefore, in the early stages of **their** writing, **students** should **avoid writing sentences which exceed three** lines.

Formal Register: Summary

- Consider audience, flow, organisation, purpose, style
- Choose formal vocabulary; write in a consistent style
- Use passive voice
- Avoid the use of first and second person pronouns
- Avoid use of phrasal verbs & colloquialisms
- Use hedging language, where appropriate
- Provide support for claims
- Avoid euphemisms, idioms & proverbs
- Do not use contractions/abbreviations
- Use numerals in dates/statistics only
- Avoid direct questions to the reader
- Minimise lists/use of 'etc': give specific examples



Thank you for your attention.

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Slideshow: Hasan Shikoh 2012
Music: GustlerX (Youtube 2009)