



Skills 360 – Levels of Formality in English (Part 1)

Discussion Questions

1. Do you often change the way you speak depending on who you're talking to?
2. Do you know any idioms that are not appropriate in formal situations?
3. Have you ever noticed differences in pronunciation between formal and informal conversation?

Vocabulary

First impression: someone's opinion or idea of someone else based on the first time they meet; "A smile and a polite greeting will help you create a good first impression in a job interview."

To extend: to hold out toward someone; "I extended my hand to John after the negotiation, but he refused to shake it."

"Chances are:" it is likely that; "If you continue to spend money like that, chances are you'll have nothing left by the end of the year."

To gauge: to make a judgment or guess about something; "I like to ask a few questions at the start of a presentation just to gauge the experience and interest of the audience."

Accordingly: in a way that fits the situation just mentioned; "It's important to understand who will be reading your proposal and adjust the writing voice accordingly."

Disastrous: very unsuccessful or having terrible consequences; "The product launch was disastrous; it was raining and only a handful of media people showed up."

"On a related note:" if you want to change the topic to something similar but not the same, you can start with "on a related note; "I agree we need to cut costs. On a related note, we need to present a new budget to finance soon."

To cut down on: to reduce; "We've managed to save \$500 a month in office expenses by cutting down on paper usage."

To curtail: to reduce or limit, especially spending or use of something; "Sales have been down for the past two quarters, so we'd best curtail spending for a while."

To call off: to cancel; "Gary's sick, so he's decided to call off the project meeting this afternoon."

Precise: very exact; "The interior designer wants very precise measurements of the office space so she can help rearrange the layout."

Vague: unclear or unspecific; "I'm not so sure about this idea Greg. Your proposal is really vague about the business benefits."

Setting: a particular time and place; "Sure, I think the Denver Grand Hotel would be a perfect setting for our annual conference."

"When it comes to:" regarding; "Everyone knows that when it comes to bathroom cleaners, our TidyTank products are the best."

To be jonesing for: to have a desire or craving for; "I know it's not quitting time yet, but I'm sure jonesing for a beer to end this tough week."

To bail: to decide not to do something you had planned to do, especially with other people; "So sorry Renata, but I'm going to have to bail on lunch today. I've just got too much work to get done."

General rule: a usual or common way of doing something; "A general rule of cash flow is to collect early and pay as late as possible."

Versus: used to show you are comparing two things; "We've had a look at the Santa Fe versus the Honda Pilot, and it's pretty clear that the Santa Fe wins in terms of reliability."

To convey: to communicate an idea, emotion, or impression, often indirectly; "If you want to convey your disappointment to June, I'd suggest taking her for coffee rather than writing a nasty email."

Reduced forms: a short and informal version or pronunciation of an expression; "Carlos needs to learn that reduced forms like 'gonna' don't sound very professional."

Can't emphasize enough: if you "can't emphasize an idea or fact enough," it is very important; "All right team, I can't emphasize enough how crucial this next step in the project is. The client is looking forward to something really great."

Transcript

Hello and welcome back to the Skills 360 podcast. I'm your host, Tim Simmons, and today I want to talk about levels of formality in spoken English.

Imagine you are looking for a job, and you have an interview at a big company. You walk into the interview room and say to the panel of interviewers: "hey there, how's it going?" Believe me, that's a bad [first impression](#).

Or what if you go to the bar to meet an old friend and when you see him you [extend](#) your hand and say "Good evening, and how do you do?" [Chances are](#) your friend is going to ask you whether you're feeling okay.

In both these situations, the problem is that you used the wrong level of formality or register. You simply can't use the same expressions, words, and idioms in every situation. You need to [gauge](#) the situation and adapt how you speak [accordingly](#). Mistakes can range in seriousness from funny to [disastrous](#).

In the examples I gave, the problem was word choice. The word "hey" is fine when you greet a friend, but not an interviewer. And "good evening" simply sounds too formal when you're going for a beer with a friend. That's an easy one, but how do you know with other expressions what's formal and what's informal?

Well, a very general rule is that longer tends to be more formal. That includes academic words. Just think of "consider" or "select" or "discover." Those are more formal than "think" and "pick" and "find." [On a related note](#), phrasal verbs tend to be more *informal* than academic verbs. So "[cut down on](#) spending" is less formal than "[curtail](#) spending." And "[call off](#) a meeting" is less formal than "cancel a meeting."

There's another important difference between formal and informal words. And that's about how [precise](#) our words are. Informally, we can get away with being really [vague](#), using nouns like "stuff" and "things" or adjectives like "good" and "bad." But in professional [settings](#), those words sound too informal because they lack precision.

[When it comes to](#) word choice, there's another area where you need to be careful, and that's with idioms. You might have learned that native speakers often say that something "rocks," if it's good, or it "sucks," if it's bad. But did you learn that those are informal expressions? Definitely not what you want to say in a job interview or a sales presentation.

So how can you tell whether an idiom is informal or not? It's all about context. If you read it, or hear it, consider the situation and who's talking to whom. If you see someone say "I'm [jonesing for](#) a coffee" or "sorry but I have to [bail](#)" to his friend, don't assume that you can use these expressions in every situation. In more formal situations, it's best to go with something more direct like "I want a coffee" or "sorry but I have to leave."

Now what about grammar? Does formality apply to grammar? You bet it does. And here's a **general rule**: the longer the expression, the more formal it is. Just think about offering someone a cup of coffee. Formally, you might say "would you like a cup of coffee?" A little less formally you might say "how about a cup of coffee?" And informally, you might just say "coffee?"

That "coffee?" example also shows the idea of complete sentences **versus** shortened sentences. So, formally you might say "that sounds like a good idea to me." Informally, you might say "sounds like a good idea." Or even: "sounds good."

Okay, we've looked at word choice and grammar. But what about pronunciation? Can *how* we speak **convey** formality? Well, it can. Basically, it works like the grammar issue. Longer and more complete is more formal.

So you might hear people drop the 'g' from '-ing' words, like "watchin" for "watching." Same for "gonna" and "going to," and "wanna" and "want to" and all those other **reduced forms**. Some people learn and practice them because they want to sound *natural*. But they sometimes don't realize that they sound naturally *informal*.

So let's recap. We've looked at formality as it relates to word choice, grammar and pronunciation. And we've seen how more academic, more precise, and longer expressions are more formal. Informal speech, on the other hand, tends to be shorter and less clear. I **can't emphasize enough** how important it is to pay attention to the difference and to be able to speak at different levels of formality. It might mean the difference between getting that new job or not.

That's all for today. If you'd like to test yourself on what we've just covered, have a look at the BusinessEnglishPod.com website. There you'll find a quiz about today's show as well as a complete transcript.

So long. And see you again soon.

Review

1. What is an appropriate way to greet someone you're meeting for the first time in a business setting? [choose 2]
 - A Hello, I'm Dave Dodge. How do you do?
 - B Oh hey there, what's up?
 - C Good morning. How are you today?
 - D Morning. How's things?

2. In terms of formality, phrasal verbs are...
 - A ... very polite.
 - B ... less formal than academic verbs.
 - C ... never acceptable.
 - D ... more formal than longer expressions.

3. Which of the following sentences uses precise/formal word choice? [choose 2]
 - A We've got a ton of stuff to get done over the next week.
 - B I thought your report was good Brett.
 - C I think the proposal lacks detail in the middle section.
 - D I'd like to discuss several budget problems with you Steven.

4. When you learn English idioms, you should...
 - A ... know that they are always informal.
 - B ... understand their proper context.
 - C ... only learn ones that are useful at all levels of formality.
 - D ... try including them in presentations and speeches.

5. In English, informal grammar tends to be...
 - A ... longer than formal grammar.
 - B ... easier to pronounce than formal grammar.
 - C ... shorter than formal grammar.
 - D ... used only in family settings.

6. Which of the following sentences demonstrate informal usage that you might want to avoid in very formal business situations? [choose all that apply]
 - A So what are you gonna do when we're all done here?
 - B I've got to pick up some things on the west side this aft.
 - C Would you like to join me for dinner on Friday?
 - D I'm curious what your thoughts are on the association's latest report.
 - E The blue one looks good. The others are kinda blah.
 - F In my opinion, we simply can't afford to invest in new computers.
 - G Sorry but this is crazy. There's no way this is gonna work.

Review Answers

1. What is an appropriate way to greet someone you're meeting for the first time in a business setting? [choose 2]
A Hello, I'm Dave Dodge. How do you do?
C Good morning. How are you today?
2. In terms of formality, phrasal verbs are...
B ... less formal than academic verbs.
3. Which of the following sentences uses precise – and therefore formal – word choice? [choose 2]
C I think the proposal lacks detail in the middle section.
D I'd like to discuss several budget problems with you Steven.
4. When you learn English idioms, you should...
B ... understand their proper context.
5. In English, informal grammar tends to be...
C ... shorter than formal grammar.
6. Which of the following sentences demonstrate informal usage that you might want to avoid in very formal business situations? [choose all that apply]
A So what are you gonna do when we're all done here?
B I've got to pick up some things on the west side this aft.
E The blue one looks good. The others are kinda blah.
G Sorry but this is crazy. There's no way this is gonna work.