

Learning, Teaching  
and Student Engagement

# English Skills

## Formal and Informal English

This module covers concepts such as

- Identifying words and phrases that are informal and therefore inappropriate for academic writing
- Selecting formal words and phrases for academic English
- Use polite language
- Send polite emails

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## **Formal and informal English at university.**

There are many varieties of English used in Australia. Each is appropriate for particular purposes in different contexts. Much of the language we describe as 'formal' is the English we use for academic purposes.

Formal English is commonly used in academic writing. The published academic texts you read are written in formal English and your assignments also need to be written in formal academic English. British spelling is standard in Australia, but you may choose another spelling system as long as you are consistent.

Informal English is more common in spoken English at university. However, in lectures and tutorials, a certain level of formality is also expected.

## **Formal or informal?**

Are the following statements written in formal or informal English? Explain why.

*I don't know why he always keeps on doing that. It happens over and over again – he's stuck on a loop!*

Academic English, whether spoken or written, should be formal in register. It should also be: impersonal, precise, qualified, rational and logical.

By contrast, informal English often includes: personal opinions that are not necessarily based on evidence; vague language; generalisations; and random order of information. It is also common to use the following language features in informal English: shortened forms of words; informal variations of vocabulary; phrasal verbs; metaphors and other figures of speech; colloquialisms; slang; and particular punctuation marks.

## **Choosing the right word**

Some words, word forms or phrases should be avoided in most academic writing. Other words may be acceptable in one academic genre and not in another. For example, an essay usually demands more formal writing than a blog entry.

## **Finding more academic synonyms**

The words or word pairs below should not generally be used in academic writing. Do you know any formal words that could replace these words?

1. get
2. thing
3. good
4. bad
5. bring along
6. go up

Find possible answers on the "Choosing the right word" handout.

## Polite language and forms of address

To address university staff, use title and surname at first, but often you will be encouraged immediately to be informal. Then you can simply use a first name and no title. If you are not encouraged to do this, remain formal. 'Professor/Mr/Ms + surname' are common, but do not address someone as 'Teacher'.

Use polite language in both formal and informal contexts. Use words and phrases such as the following frequently: 'please'; 'thank you'; 'excuse me'; 'would you mind if I...?'; 'may I add something?'; and 'I'm afraid I disagree with that because...'. 'Sorry' is only used for apologies and 'pardon' can be used if you didn't hear something. 'Excuse me' is the correct phrase for politely seeking attention or asking a question.

## Language for Emails

At university, you may need to send emails to your lecturers or tutors. This will require you to use polite, formal English.

- Use the **subject heading bar** to inform the reader, e.g. "SS1010: group work problem"
- Write **short**, clear emails
- Choose appropriate **salutations**

### Salutations

Very formal: Dear Professor/Ms Brown,  
Sincerely, (full name)

Semi-formal: Hello John, Good morning Anthony,  
Regards, Kind Regards, (first name or full name for clarity)

Informal: Hi Anne,  
See you soon, Cheers, Bye for now!

### Useful Phrases

The following website provides some suggestions for phrases to use in a more formal email:

<http://en.bab.la/phrases/business/email/english-english/>

## Summary

- **Written English at JCU:** formal and academic; avoid informal language
- **Spoken English at JCU:** a mixture of informal and formal, but generally academic in style
- **Polite language:** helpful for all formal or informal spoken and written communication