

Basics

Knowing how and when to use formal and informal language is a key skill for spoken English in academic settings. By identifying their use, you can take part in more serious academic discussions. It is important to learn to use language forms that mark formality, such as longer sentences linking complex ideas, less emotive and less personalized language through the use of passive forms, and a voice that reflects this depersonalized tone. Awareness of these features will allow you to speak appropriately in academic discussions.

The academic context

In the academic world, there are numerous situations where you need to adjust the formality of your speech. Examples include presentations, tutorials, seminars, debates and academic discussions.

Key features

To prepare yourself to speak, you need to think about the context:

- Think about the situation: Who are you talking to? What type of communication is it?
- Think about the purpose: Are you planning something informally with other students? Are you presenting an academic subject to a wider audience?
- Think about what you can hear: Are others using more or less formal language? Can you recognize important language features which tell you about the formality?

Unlike academic writing, academic speech does not need to be very formal. You should try to use some language features to make it more formal (e.g. passive forms, longer sentences and more linking words, etc.); it is important to avoid very personalized or conversational language such as slang, idioms and emotive words.

Features of formal language

- longer sentences with more complex ideas
- frequent use of linking words/phrases to join complex ideas in sentences
- more frequent use of relative clauses (*which ...*, *who ...*, etc.) to join complex ideas in sentences
- more frequent use of passive forms
- less frequent emotional language to present a more serious and considered tone
- using your voice to reflect a more depersonalized and neutral tone

Features of informal language

- active forms
- emotional language
- personalized forms

Challenges / difficulties

It takes discipline to recognize key language features to mark the formality of what is being said. Maintaining concentration in using correct forms can be a challenge.

How can I develop this skill?

Try to get as much practice of listening to others use language in academic settings (lectures, conversations, debates, etc.) as you can.

Learning outcome

When you have mastered this skill, you will be able to know which situations are informal and which are formal in academic settings and to recognize appropriate language for those situations. You will need to understand key language features that mark formal and informal language (passive forms, impersonal forms and voice, longer and more complex sentences, etc.) and feel confident speaking in both formal and informal discussions.

Theory to practice

Look at the presentation transcript below. The keywords are highlighted.

Student We carried out our study over three weeks. I think the results were very good and interesting. Really good were the results for spending for 18 to 24 year olds. These students all answered online. Fast results meant us looking at the stuff superfast. And so, we get more replies in our study. But next time we'll use social media, I think. It'll be more exciting to use and surely more efficient. Anyway, we decided the numbers meant spending was down this year.

- 1 Is the presentation formal or informal?
- 2 What types of language features are highlighted?
- 3 What alternative words and phrases can be used to change the level of formality?

Ways to get more practice

Work with a partner. Take turns role-playing different formal and informal academic situations. Be sure to record and listen to some of your conversations to reflect on the language features you used.

Listen to academic spoken English on the internet as much as you can, thinking about the language features you hear.