

Basics

Knowing how and when to use formal and informal language is a key skill for spoken English in academic settings. By identifying when their use is appropriate, students can take part in more serious academic discussions. Learning when and how to use language forms that mark informal and formal speech will allow students to speak confidently and participate in academic speaking activities.

The academic context

In the academic world, there are numerous situations where you need to choose formal or informal language when speaking. Examples include presentations, tutorials, seminars, debates and academic discussions.

Key features

Be prepared before you speak. There are some suggestions about this below:

- Recognize and use language forms that are more formal. For example:
 - softening words (*perhaps, maybe, etc.* – to make language less direct)
 - modal expressions (*could, would, etc.*)
 - *If* requests
 - respectful language (including titles)
 - more polite and less direct language
 - full forms of structures
 - longer academic words
 - synonyms (instead of repeating items)
- Recognize and use appropriate language forms that are more informal. For example:
 - slang
 - phrasal verbs
 - idioms/expressions
 - shorter common words
 - abbreviations and contractions

It is important to remember that the level of formality required can vary depending on the country, academic staff, etc. Observe and listen to what is and isn't acceptable around you. Using full forms instead of contractions is good practice in formal academic writing, but is often unnecessary for more formal academic speaking, which is less rigid than academic writing with the use of some less formal features frequently acceptable.

There are some ways you can prepare yourself to use informal and formal language:

- Think about the situation: Who are you talking to? What is the subject of the discussion?
- Think about the purpose: Are you planning something informally with other students? Are you discussing academic matters with staff or larger audiences?
- Think about the language used: Are others using more or less formal language? Can you recognize important language features which inform you about the formality?

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 also be a challenge. Try to get as much practice of listening to others using language in academic settings (lectures, conversations, debates, etc.) as you can.

How can I develop this skill?

See if you can record some speakers in academic settings – for example, in a lecture, a seminar or a conversation. (Always make sure you have the permission of everyone involved.) Try to identify language features which make the speech formal or informal. It might help you to transcribe a few sections. You might find that much of the spoken English, especially in informal settings, looks very strange when you write it down!

The best way to develop your speaking skills is to practise. Make the most of your opportunities. Formal and informal settings can both be a bit scary, but remember that they both have advantages, too: in formal settings, such as presentations, you can usually prepare what you say in advance; in informal settings, people will usually help you if you can't think of the language you need.

Learning outcome

Students who have mastered this skill will be able to know what situations are informal and formal in academic settings and be able to recognize appropriate language for those situations. Students will need to understand key language features that mark formal and informal language (modal expressions, more academic words, etc.) and feel confident speaking in both formal and informal situations.

Theory to practice

Look at the discussion below. The keywords are highlighted.

- A I need to look up the academic info for the project.
B Yeah, no worries. Drop in at the library.
A Sure. I think they've got lots of stuff on our topic. I'll just ask the staff.
B OK. I'll go through the university's RPD.
A RPD? What's that?
B Err, Research Portal Database, I think. Anyway. Let's get a bite.
A Yeah. I'm hungry, too.

- Is the discussion more formal or informal?
- What types of language features are highlighted?
- 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.