**Formal and informal language**

Most people speak and write in different ways on different occasions. In some languages, for example, there are very complicated rules about how to speak to older or more important people. English does not have a system of this kind. However, there are some words and structures which are mostly used in *form*al situations, when people are careful about how they express themselves: for example in official notices, business letters or reports, meetings or conferences, or polite conversations with strangers. And some words and structures are mostly used in informal situations: for example in conversations with friends, or letters to one's family. Writing is more often formal, and speech is more often informal, but informal writing and formal speech are used when the situation makes them preferable.

*Customer toilets are at the rear of the building*. (Printed notice in an Oxfordshire petrol station)

The toilets are outside round the back. (Handwritten notice in the same petrol station, put up perhaps because the manager felt this would be easier for some of his customers to understand.)

Most words and expressions are neither formal nor informal, but neutral – English speakers do not have to know two ways of saying everything.

Grammar

Some grammatical structures have different formal and informal versions. For example, contracted auxiliary verbs and negatives are common in informal speech and writing. Compare:

formal: It has gone. It is not possible.

informal: It's gone. It isn't possible.

Prepositions come at the end of certain structures in informal language. Compare:

formal: In which century did he live?

informal: Which century did he live in?

Some relative structures are different. Compare:

formal: The man whom she married ...  
informal: The man she married ...

Some determiners are followed more often by singular verb forms in formal language, and by plural forms in informal language. Compare:

formal: Neither of us likes him.

informal: *Neither of us like him*.

Subject and object forms of pronouns (e.g. I and me) are used differently in formal and informal language. Compare:

* formal: *It was she who first saw what to do*.
* informal: *It was her that first saw what to do*.
* formal: *Whom did they elect?*
* informal: *Who did they elect?*

Ellipsis (leaving out words) is more common in informal language. Compare:

* formal: *Have you seen Mr Andrews?*
* informal: Seen John?
* formal: *We think that it is possible*.
* informal: *We think it's possible*.

Vocabulary

Some words and expressions are used mainly in formal situations; in neutral or informal situations other words and expressions are used. And some words and expressions are only used in informal situations. Some examples:

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| – formal: | *commence* |
| neutral/informal: | *begin, start* |
| - formal: | *alight (from a bus or train)* |
| neutral/informal: | *get off* |
| – formal: | *I beg your pardon?* |
| neutral/informal: | *Pardon? Sorry? (*AmE *excuse me? pardon me?)* |
| informal: | *what?* |
| – formal: | *repair* |
| neutral/informal: | *mend (*BrE*)* |
| informal: | *fix* |
| – formal: | *acceptable, satisfactory* |
| neutral/informal: | *all right* |
| informal: | *OK* |
| – formal: | *I am (very) grateful to you.* |
| neutral/informal: | *Thank you.* |
| informal: | *Thanks.* |