

Lesson Plan:

Formal vs. informal language register

LEVEL	TIME	SKILLS	FOCUS
Intermediate / Advanced (B1-C1)	60-75 minutes	Writing, vocabulary, speaking	Identifying and producing language across the formality spectrum; same meaning, different register

OBJECTIVES

By the end of the lesson, students will be able to:

- Identify the register of a piece of writing or speech
- Rewrite the same content at different register levels
- Understand what makes language formal or informal
- Choose the right register for a given audience and purpose

TARGET LANGUAGE & EXAMPLES

What determines register?

- Relationship: boss vs. friend, stranger vs. family member
- Purpose: job application vs. text message, academic essay vs. blog post
- Medium: email vs. letter vs. WhatsApp, speech vs. report

Vocabulary differences

- ask → enquire (formal) / wanna know (very informal)
- help → assist (formal) / give a hand (informal)
- buy → purchase (formal) / grab / snap up (informal)
- problem → issue / matter (formal) / hassle / pain (informal)
- use → utilize (formal) / use / chuck in (informal)

Structural differences

- Passive voice: formal writing favors passive: 'The report was submitted.'
- Contractions: informal only: It's, they're, won't — NOT in formal writing.
- Sentence length: formal = longer, embedded clauses; informal = shorter, direct.
- First person: formal writing often uses 'one' or passive; informal uses 'I' freely.

Meaning & Nuance

Feature	Formal	Informal
Vocabulary	enquire, assist, commence, sufficient	ask, help, start, enough
Contractions	never: cannot, do not, will not	common: can't, don't, won't
Passive voice	common: it was decided that...	rare: they decided...
Sentences	longer, complex, embedded clauses	shorter, direct, fragments OK
Greeting (email)	Dear Mr Smith, / Dear Sir/Madam	Hi Tom, / Hey
Closing (email)	Yours sincerely / Best regards	Cheers / Thanks / Speak soon

LESSON PROCEDURE

1. Warm-up: Same message, three ways (10 min)

Task: Show one message written three ways: very informal, neutral, very formal.

- Students rank them and identify what makes each appropriate or not. → Immediately establishes the spectrum.

2. Presentation (15 min)

Task: Four factors of register: vocabulary, grammar, sentence structure, tone.

- Discuss: what happens when register is wrong? Examples of register mismatch.
- First-person avoidance in formal writing — use passive or 'one' instead.

3. Transformation task (15 min)

Task: Rewrite 5 sentences at a different register.

- 'Can you give me more info?' → 'Could you please provide further information?'
- 'The results are kinda bad.' → 'The results are somewhat disappointing.'

4. Writing task (25 min)

Task: Write the same announcement twice: formal memo and informal Slack message.

- Topic: company policy change / team event / new hire.
- Peer review: is the register consistent throughout each version?

TEACHER NOTES

- Register mismatch is a common problem in professional writing — too casual in a job application, too stiff in a text message.
- Contractions are the single clearest marker of informality in writing — always check them in formal pieces.

EXTENSION / HOMEWORK

Choose one or more:

1. Rewrite a formal email as an informal message and vice versa.
2. Write the same piece of information as a broadsheet news article and a text message.
3. Collect 3 real examples of register mismatch and explain what went wrong and how to fix it.