Formal and informal vocabulary in English

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Abstract. This article explains the difference between formal and informal vocabulary in the English language. It is written for students who are learning English at an intermediate level. The article uses simple language, clear examples, and easy-to-understand comparisons to help learners choose the right words in the right situation. Understanding formal and informal vocabulary helps students communicate better in school, at work, and in everyday life.

Key words: formal vocabulary, informal vocabulary, slang, colloquial language, register, communication, word choice, English language learning.

Introduction

Every day, we use language to talk, write, and share ideas. But did you know that we do not always use the same words? When you talk to your teacher, you use different words than when you talk to your best friend. This difference is called register — the style of language we choose depending on the situation.

In English, vocabulary can be divided into two main types: formal vocabulary and informal vocabulary. Formal vocabulary is used in serious situations like school essays, business emails, and official letters. Informal vocabulary is used in everyday conversations, text messages, and friendly chats.

Choosing the right words is very important. If you use informal words in a formal letter, it can seem impolite or unprofessional. If you use very formal words with friends, it can sound strange or unfriendly. This article will help you understand the difference and give you many useful examples.

1. What Is Formal Vocabulary?

Formal vocabulary refers to words and expressions that we use in official, academic, and professional settings. These words are usually longer, more precise, and follow standard grammar rules. Formal language is used when we want to sound respectful, serious, and professional.

Formal vocabulary is commonly used in:

- School essays and academic writing
- Official letters and emails
- News reports and textbooks
- Business meetings and presentations
- Applications for jobs or universities

In formal writing, we also avoid contractions. A contraction is when two words are joined together with an apostrophe, like "don't" (do not) or "I'm" (I am). In formal writing, we always write the full form: "do not," "I am," "cannot," "will not."

Formal vocabulary also avoids slang and emotional words. Instead of saying "awesome" or "cool," a formal text might say "excellent" or "impressive." Instead of "kids," a formal text says "children."

Examples of formal vocabulary:

- *"I would like to request your assistance with this matter."*
- *"The research demonstrates a significant improvement in student performance."*
- *"We regret to inform you that your application was unsuccessful."*

2. What Is Informal Vocabulary?

Informal vocabulary refers to the relaxed, everyday words and expressions we use with friends, family, and people we know well. Informal language is friendly, natural, and easy to understand. It often includes contractions, slang, idioms, and emotional words.

Informal vocabulary is commonly used in:

- Conversations with friends and family
- Text messages and social media posts
- Informal emails and personal notes
- Casual talk at school or at home

Slang is a special type of informal vocabulary. Slang words are very casual and often used by young people. For example, "cool," "awesome," "chill," and "hang out" are slang expressions. Slang changes over time, and different groups of people may use different slang words.

Idioms are also common in informal communication. An idiom is a phrase that does not mean exactly what the words say. For example, "break the ice" does not mean breaking real ice — it means to start a conversation in a relaxed way. "Hit the books" means to study, not to hit anything with books!

Examples of informal vocabulary:

- *"Hey! Wanna hang out after school?"*
- *"That movie was so awesome!"*
- *"Can't believe how fast the time flew by!"*

3. Formal vs. Informal: A Comparison Table

The table below shows common words and phrases in both formal and informal styles. Studying this table will help you recognize and use both styles correctly.

Formal Vocabulary	Informal Vocabulary
purchase	buy

Formal Vocabulary	Informal Vocabulary
assist	help
sufficient	enough
commence	start / begin
I am unable to attend.	I can't come.
I would like to inform you...	I just wanted to tell you...
Please find attached...	Here's the file...

4. How to Choose the Right Vocabulary

When you write or speak in English, always think about three things: Who is your audience? What is the purpose of your communication? Where are you — in a formal or informal situation?

If you are writing to your teacher, your headmaster, or a company, use formal vocabulary. If you are texting your friend or posting on social media, informal vocabulary is fine.

Here is a simple way to remember the difference. Imagine you need to ask for a day off from school. To your friend, you might say: "Hey, I'm not coming to school tomorrow." But in a letter to your school director, you would write: "I would like to inform you that I will be unable to attend school on the 5th of May due to a medical appointment."

Both sentences have the same meaning, but the vocabulary and style are completely different. The formal version sounds polite and respectful. The informal version sounds natural and friendly.

The ability to switch between formal and informal vocabulary is called communicative competence. This is an important skill for every English language learner. The more you practice, the easier it becomes to choose the right words.

Conclusion

Formal and informal vocabulary are both important parts of the English language. Formal vocabulary is used in academic, professional, and official situations. It is precise, serious, and follows grammar rules carefully. Informal vocabulary is used in everyday conversations. It is friendly, relaxed, and often includes contractions, slang, and idioms.

Knowing the difference between these two styles helps you communicate clearly and appropriately in any situation. Whether you are writing an essay, sending a text message, or talking to a new friend, choosing the right vocabulary makes your communication more effective.

As English learners, the best way to improve is to read widely — textbooks, newspapers, stories, and also informal texts like social media posts. This will help you see how vocabulary changes in different contexts and build confidence in your own language use.

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