

Based on Hugh Cory, *Advanced Writing*, Oxford 2000

5 Formal and Informal

One of the most important areas to master in terms of register is the difference between formal and informal English. Of course, there are many degrees of formality, and most written English (including newspapers, magazines and novels) is situated somewhere between the two extremes.

Here is a list of some of the most characteristic features that differentiate formal and informal English, followed by some preliminary exercises.

Formal

Words of Latin / French origin
Single-word verbs

Formal connecting words
Impersonal constructions
it is said that
the price has been increased
one never knows

Abstract nouns

Is happiness possible during unemployment?

After clarification of the problem areas ...

Not ending with preposition;
use of *whom*
To whom were you speaking?

Complex sentences

Use of inversion for conditionals and emphasis
Should you require further information, please contact ...

No contractions in writing
I will, we would

Informal

Words of Anglo-Saxon origin
Phrasal verbs, idioms with *get*

Informal connecting words
Active constructions
they say that
they've put the price up
you never know

Modal verbs, adjectives, clauses, etc.

Can people be happy when they haven't got a job?

When the bits everyone was getting wrong had been explained ...

Ending with preposition

Who were you speaking to?

Simple sentences

Inversion sometimes used for emphasis
Only then did I realize ...

Contractions in writing
I'll, we'll

Vocabulary

A Origin

Why are some English words considered to be more polite or refined, whereas others which mean the same thing are thought rude or vulgar?

English vocabulary comprises words taken from many languages, particularly Anglo-Saxon, French and Latin. In 1066 the Anglo-Saxon inhabitants of Britain were conquered by the French-speaking Normans. As French was the language of the ruling classes (and Latin the language of education), words derived from French or Latin have been considered more formal than those derived from the language of the Anglo-Saxons.

The table next page compares relatively formal words of Latin / French origin with their less formal alternatives, many of Anglo-Saxon origin. It is an illustration of a general tendency, not a conversion table: the choice of vocabulary always depends on the context. Supply the missing words.

Formal	Informal	Formal	Informal
Verbs		Nouns	
to depart	to go	carnivore	meat-eater
to retain	_____	putrefaction	_____
to cease	_____	deficiency	_____
to function	_____	vision	_____
to masticate*	_____	residence	_____
to demonstrate	_____	respiration	_____
to reside	_____	somnambulist	_____
_____	to seem	comprehension	_____
_____	to shorten	perspiration	_____
_____	to end		
_____	to help	Adjectives	
_____	to begin	incorrect	wrong
_____	to want	amiable	_____
_____	to get	vacant	_____
_____	to free	insane	_____
_____	to eat	inexpensive	_____
		_____	lively
		_____	better
Adverbials			childish
subsequently	next / later		enough
principally	_____		whole
_____	so		older
_____	at first		
_____	in the end		

*Bodily functions are an area where the difference of formality is particularly marked.

B Phrasal verbs and single-word verbs

Killing a parrot (a true story)

- a Mr Lamprey and Mr Pear are neighbours. Mr Pear and his wife keep parrots. The noise made by the parrots has finally made Mr Lamprey so angry that he has broken down the fence between their two gardens and strangled one of the parrots. You are the lawyer defending Mr Lamprey, who is being sued by Mr Pear for the damage done to his property. The following is how your client describes the events to you.

This has been going on for three years, ever since the Pears *came along* and brought their infernal parrots into the neighbourhood. The noise of the birds *got on my nerves* from the very start **so** I did use to complain a bit. I **finally** *gave up hope of getting* used to it when in the middle of the night, I heard someone calling out my name. It was a trick he'd put one of his parrots up to, just to *wind me up!* In the morning I had it out with him, **but** he had the cheek to say that the bird wasn't saying my name at all, **and** it wasn't his fault if the bird's love call sounded a bit like "Herbert"

'I didn't know what to do. I *talked it over* with my mates at work, who suggested I *get in touch with* the City Council **and** maybe *put in* a formal complaint. **So** I rang them up **and** they *put me through* to the Social Services. The woman there said she'd come and *check out* the parrots the next week, **but** she never *turned up*. **So** we *fixed up* another time, and **she** stood me up again. They kept on *putting it off* till one day, out of the blue, a bloke *showed up*. He left after five minutes, saying he'd *pass the matter on* to the Environmental Health Department.'

Now you are speaking in court, before a judge and jury. Note that your account appears more concise and less emotive than your client's. Fill the blanks by replacing the phrasal verbs and phrases with *get* in the original (in italics) with a single-word verb selected from the list below. Put the verb into the appropriate tense.

lodge	irritate	despair	arrive	contact	refer
postpone	visit	become	discuss	provoke	investigate
connect	arrange	come			

'Ever since the Pears (1) _____ in the neighbourhood three years ago my client, Mr Lamprey, has been (2) _____ by the birds. He finally (3) _____ of (4) _____ accustomed to the noise the night that one of the birds started to call out his name Mr Pear would appear to have taught the bird to say the name "Herbert" with the sole intention of (5) _____ my client.

'Having (6) _____ the problem with his colleagues, my client (7) _____ the City Council with a view to (8) _____ a complaint. The switchboard (9) _____ him to the Social Services Department, where a woman promised to (10) _____ the matter the following week. The woman never (11) _____. Another time was (12) _____, but again the woman failed to appear. In fact, this initial visit was continually (13) _____ until six months later, when a council officer finally (14) _____. After a brief inspection, the officer said he would (15) _____ the case to the Environmental Health Department.'

b Now, reverse the process. The rest of the story is in your words. Read it, then complete Mr Lamprey's more informal version by filling each gap with a phrasal verb selected from the list below, or with the verb *get*.

'The prospect of another six months waiting *angered* my client. He told the council officer he was no longer prepared to *tolerate* the situation; **moreover**, he felt it was the Council's job to *restore* peace and quiet to the neighbourhood. **Nevertheless**, in the twelve months that have *elapsed* since the officer came, the Council has *taken no further action*.

'Matters *deteriorated* **recently** when Mr Pear's wife Dolores *entered the quarrel*. My client had previously *enjoyed good relations* with Mrs Pear, **but all good will ended** when it *transpired* that Mrs Pear had been phoning the police, *claiming* that the Lampreys had threatened to kill the birds.'

make out
join in

turn out
get on with

fall out
put up with

go by
get

bring back

'Well I don't mind telling you that I (1) _____ pretty angry. I told him that if he thought I was going to (2) _____ another six months of being messed about by the City Council and taunted by screaming parrots he had another think coming. I told him it was his job to (3) _____ peace and quiet to the neighbourhood. Well, 12 months have (4) _____ now and the council hasn't (5) _____ anything done about it.

'Recently, things (6) _____ worse when Mrs Pear (7) _____. We used to (8) _____ her OK, but then we (9) _____ when it (10) _____ she was the one that kept phoning the police about us, (11) _____ we had threatened to kill the birds ...'

c Look back at the connecting words in **bold** in the boxed parts of the story (beginning with '**so** I did use to complain'). What is the difference between the connecting words in the formal speech and those in the informal spoken English?