

Malcolm Mann
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Formality and register in exam writing tasks



Getting the register and level of formality right in an article, essay, letter or email, for example, can be very challenging for students.

In this session, we'll explore what 'register' and 'formality' really mean in the context of exams. We'll list some of the key questions students should ask themselves before/as they write, and focus on some key dos and don'ts to ensure exam success in this area.

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Thank you again, and I look forward to attending another of your presentations in the near future.
Yours sincerely,

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What is register?

The type of language you use in a particular situation or when communicating with a particular person or people:

Style/tone (conversational, academic, etc)

Formality/politeness/deference

What is register?

A number of main text-type categories:

CONVERSATION

NON-CONVERSATIONAL SPEECH

FICTION

NEWS

ACADEMIC WRITING

NON-FICTION PROSE

CORRESPONDENCE

ADVERTISING

PUBLIC NOTICES

Why is register so difficult for students?

We don't always put enough emphasis on register and formality when teaching and presenting vocabulary.

e.g.

put up with = tolerate

in a nutshell = basically, essentially

Why is register so difficult for students?

Register and formality have so many different aspects and dimensions to them.

Style is a nebulous concept to teach.

Style/register depends on factors such as determining your relationship with the target reader.

Why is register so difficult for students?

For each main text-type category, there can be a huge number of different registers, e.g.

NON-CONVERSATIONAL SPEECH

A sermon

A lecture

A teacher talking to students

A radio interview

A business discussion

A political speech

Etc etc etc

Why is register so difficult for students?

Register/formality change over time.

How has email, text messaging and social media affected the formality of written texts?

Why is register so difficult for students?

Not everyone agrees on what register is appropriate for a particular situation.

Why is register so difficult for students?

Languages differ in terms of how they deal with register/formality, and even in terms of how important register/formality is in written texts.

For the English language:

- politeness/deference extremely important (class structure)
- English doesn't have plural 'you' for politeness

How important is register in exams?

For the *First* (B2) Writing paper, 25% of marks for each composition are explicitly given to register.

How important is register in exams?

Content focuses on how well the candidate has fulfilled the task, in other words if they have done what they were asked to do.

Communicative achievement

Organisation

Language

How important is register in exams?

Content

Communicative achievement focuses on how appropriate the writing is for the task and whether the candidate has used **the appropriate register**.

Organisation

Language

How important is register in exams?

Content

Communicative achievement

Organisation focuses on the way the candidate puts together the piece of writing, in other words if it is logical and ordered.

Language

How important is register in exams?

Content

Communicative achievement

Organisation

Language focuses on vocabulary and grammar. This includes the range of language as well as how accurate it is.

How important is register in exams?

“Candidates are required to write a discursive essay in grammatically correct English, using a neutral or formal register.”

“...candidates should consider carefully what level of formality is appropriate to the task.”

“Your students need to think carefully about who the target reader is for each task and try to write in an appropriate style and tone.”

How important is register in exams?

“Conventions of the communicative task include such things as genre, format, **register** and function. For example, a personal letter should not be written as a formal report, should be laid out accordingly, and use the right **tone** for the communicative purpose.”

How important is register in exams?

Proficiency: “The question identifies the context, the writer’s role and the target reader, which helps the candidate to choose the **appropriate register**. ... Even though a candidate may display an excellent command of the language, **an answer will only achieve a high mark if all the above factors are taken into account.**”

How important is register in exams?

AN ARTICLE: "...the type of publication mentioned [in the question] gives the candidate guidance as to the appropriate **register** to be used – for example, how academic or lively the article should be.."

A REVIEW: "The target reader is specified in the question, so the candidate knows not only what **register** is appropriate, but also has an idea about the kind of information to include."

How can we best prepare our students?

Analysis of specific models (in coursebook, their own writing, in exam handbooks, from real life)

Comparative analysis of different registers

Key questions when facing a writing task

Key information re register (grammar, vocabulary, punctuation, information)

How can we best prepare our students?

We have to start work on formality and register early (B1 or even before).

We have to see this as an ongoing process, focusing on register/formality when teaching grammar and vocabulary, and reading, as well as when preparing for writing tasks.

Analysis: what makes this very (too?) formal?

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Vocabulary/set phrases
in red

Grammar
certain that

Punctuation
no exclamation marks
no contractions

Information
name of reader
name of presentation
Name/place of event

Analysis: what makes this semi-formal?

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Vocabulary / set phrases
in red

Grammar
sure that X

Punctuation
no exclamation marks
some contractions

Information
name of reader
X name of presentation
X name/place of event

Analysis: what makes this informal?

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Analysis: what makes this informal?

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Vocabulary / set phrases
in red

Grammar

If it's..., I'll...

Punctuation

exclamation marks
contractions

Information

Use of 'I'

name of reader

X name of presentation

X name/place of event

Task-based analysis

Rewrite as semi-formal

Rewrite as formal

Multiple-choice:

- a) I can't wait till
- b) I am looking forward to

Scoring

What mark out of 5 would you give this for register?

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Comparative analysis: style

The writer...	...uses a lively, chatty, almost conversational style.	...tries to interest and entertain the reader.	...wants to present information so its easy to find.	...directly addresses the reader.	...discuss a subject in a logical and formal way.
Unit 1 Informal letter					
Unit 2 Short story					
Unit 3 Discursive composition / essay					
Unit 4 Review					
Unit 5 Formal letter					
Unit 6 Report					
Unit 7 Article					

Comparative analysis: detail

The writer uses...	...the impersonal passive (e.g. <i>It is said that...</i>)	...contractions (= short forms).	...a rhetorical question.	...discursive phrases and expressions.	...formal vocabulary.	...informal punctuation.
Unit 1 Informal letter						
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Key questions for a Writing task

Who is the target reader?

Who is the assumed writer?

What's the relationship between them?

Should I address the target reader directly?

What style is required?

What level of formality is required?

What set phrases are/aren't appropriate?

What kind of vocabulary is/isn't appropriate?

What grammatical structures are/aren't appropriate?

What punctuation is/isn't appropriate?

Example writing task

2 A literary magazine is running a series of reviews of books that people enjoyed reading as a child and would recommend for children today. You decide to send in a review in which you describe a book you enjoyed and the attractions it had for you as a child. You should also explain why it remains relevant for children today.

Write your **review**.

Example Proficiency writing task

2 A literary magazine is running a series of reviews of books that people enjoyed reading as a child and would recommend for children today. You decide to send in a review in which you describe a book you enjoyed and the attractions it had for you as a child. You should also explain why it remains relevant for children today.

Who is the target reader?

A child? A teenager? An adult? What do we know about them?

Who is the assumed writer?

A child? A teenager? An adult? What do we know about them?

What's the relationship between them?

Should I (i.e. the writer) address the target reader directly?

What style is required? Academic? Lively? Something else?

What level of formality is required?

Key dos and don'ts: contractions

An easy way to make your writing more formal is to avoid contractions (= short forms).

An easy way to make your writing more informal is to use contractions.

I'll share it with my colleagues.

I will share it with my colleagues.

I'm looking forward to hearing from you.

I am looking forward to hearing from you.

Key dos and don'ts: relative pronouns

An easy way to make your writing more formal is to use *which*, etc.

An easy way to make your writing more informal is to use *that*, or no relative pronoun.

This is a problem which many people face.

This is a problem that a lot of people face.

This is a problem lots of people have.

Key dos and don'ts: personal pronouns

In academic writing, try to avoid the use of 'I'.

~~*I think...*~~

~~*I am going to discuss...*~~

However, 'I', 'me' and 'my' are acceptable in set discursive phrases:

As far as I am concerned...

It seems to me that...

I would argue that...

To my mind,

I personally/strongly believe that...

Key dos and don'ts: hypotheticals

The more hypothetical a statement,
the more formal/polite it is.

This is because hypothetical statements create
distance. Distance = politeness:

Send me the slides.

Can you send me the slides?

Could/would you send me the slides?

I'd be grateful if you could/would send me the slides.

I wonder if you could/would send me the slides.

Key dos and don'ts: hypotheticals

The more hypothetical a statement,
the more formal/polite it is.

This is because hypothetical statements create
distance. Distance = politeness:

Direct = informal: *I think that...*

Hypothetical = formal: *I would argue that...*

Key dos and don'ts: the passive

The passive voice is much more common in academic writing than in other registers.

If you're writing an essay, try to include at least two examples of a passive construction.

Try to include one example of the impersonal passive, e.g. *It has been said that...*

Key dos and don'ts: impersonal *it*

In an essay, try to include at least one example of impersonal *it* (whether followed by the passive or not).

It is well known that...

It has been said that...

It may seem that...

It is uncertain whether...

Key dos and don'ts: *will* and *be going to*

Use *will* to make your writing more formal.

Use *be going to* to make your writing more informal.

Essay:

It is unclear whether this will prove to be successful in the long term.

Informal letter:

I'm not sure if I'm going to pass or not!

Key dos and don'ts: phrasal verbs

Phrasal verbs are rarely used in formal writing.

In formal writing, if you're thinking of using a phrasal verb, ask yourself if there's a more formal equivalent. If there is, use it. If there isn't, use the phrasal verb.

Key dos and don'ts: phrasal verbs

crop up

get up

carry out

put off

get away (from)

go up (e.g. prices)

look into

put out (e.g. a fire)

turn down

turn into

turn up

Key dos and don'ts: phrasal verbs

crop up

get up

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get away (from)

go up (e.g. prices)

look into

put out (e.g. a fire)

turn down

turn into

turn up

occur, arise

rise, arise

perform, undertake, conduct

postpone, delay

escape (from)

increase, rise

investigate, research

extinguish

decline, not accept

become

arrive, appear, discover

Key dos and don'ts: idioms

Idioms are rarely used in formal writing.

In formal writing, if you're thinking of using an idiom, ask yourself if there's a more formal equivalent. If there is, use it. If there isn't, use the idiom – if you're sure it works in that register. If you're not sure, don't take the risk.

e.g. Don't use in an essay:

in a nutshell

by the way

kick the bucket

beat about the bush

Key dos and don'ts: idioms

Idioms are rarely used in formal writing.

In formal writing, if you're thinking of using an idiom, ask yourself if there's a more formal equivalent. If there is, use it. If there isn't, use the idiom – if you're sure it works in that register. If you're not sure, don't take the risk.

e.g. consider using instead:

in a nutshell *basically, essentially*

by the way *incidentally*

kick the bucket *die*

beat about the bush *prevaricate, hesitate*

But do use appropriate idioms in informal writing and friendly, conversational articles and reviews.

Key dos and don'ts: rhetorical questions

These can and should be used in articles and essays but be careful.

In an article (or review, if appropriate), you can address the reader directly:

Have you ever considered using your mobile phone to make a short film?

In an essay, you should not address the reader directly:

What is the main cause of this pollution?

Key dos and don'ts: inversions

Try to include one inversion in an essay.

Not only is this unworkable from a practical perspective, but it is also unethical.

There is no evidence that this is workable from a practical perspective. Nor is it an ethical solution to the problem.

Key dos and don'ts: *get*

The verb *get* is often used in informal and semi-formal writing. You need to know its many different meanings and uses.

However, *get* is very rarely used in formal writing.

If you're thinking of using the verb *get* in an essay or other formal piece of writing, ask yourself what the more formal equivalent is.

Key dos and don'ts: **get**

3 Write the more formal equivalent for each word or phrase in bold. There might be more than one possibility for some of them.

Example: We've **got** some serious issues to tackle. *have*

- 1 One surfer **got** badly bitten by the shark. *was*
- 2 We **got** the equipment yesterday. *bought / received / acquired*
- 3 The politician **got** a round of applause. *was given / received*
- 4 They **got** separated at the airport. *became*
- 5 They finally **got** a plane home. *caught*
- 6 The PM finally **got** the cabinet to support her. *persuaded*
- 7 You need to **get** a visa before you can enter the country. *obtain / buy / acquire*
- 8 The team will **get to** Berlin tomorrow. *reach / arrive at*
- 9 Too many young people are unable to **get** work. *find*
- 10 No-one may **get on** a train without a ticket. *enter / board*

Students then produce appropriate informal sentences using 'get'.

Key dos and don'ts: *have, take, make*

Make sure you understand the register and formality of phrases with *have, take* and *make*.

Key dos and don'ts: *have, take, make*

Which of these phrases would you be least likely to use in an essay?

Have no time	(X)	✓	In a review for a young people's magazine
Have a look (at)	X	✓	
Have an/no/any idea	X	✓	
Have an/no/the effect	✓	✓	
Make any/no sense	✓	✓	
Make use of	✓	✓	
Take place	✓	✓	
Take part	(X)	✓	
Take advantage (of)	✓	✓	
Take a (good) look	X	✓	
Take care	X	✓	
Take the form of	✓	✓	

Key dos and don'ts: *other collocations*

Learning collocations is a vital part of vocabulary development.

As part of that, it's essential to learn the register and formality of collocations.

For example, *little* vs *small*. Many collocations with *little* are informal, and many collocations with *small* are more formal:

little: boy, kitten, kid, baby, in a little while

small: small amount of, small part, small quantity

But note: inversion with *little*, *little* = *not much* are more formal

Key dos and don'ts: *other collocations*

You need to know which words often collocate with other words. E.g. in academic writing, what does the adjective *obvious* often collocate with?

difference, difficulty, challenge, example, fact, problem, question, reason, way

A good learner dictionary, e.g. the Macmillan English Dictionary, can provide a lot of useful information on this.

Key dos and don'ts: discursive phrases

It's vital that you know a wide range of discursive phrases (such as *in my opinion*, *on the other hand*, etc), and their functions.

It's equally vital that you know what text-types and registers it's (in)appropriate to use them in.

Which of these are probably (in)appropriate for an article for a young people's magazine?

<i>In my view</i>	✓
<i>What's more</i>	✓
<i>In conclusion</i>	X
<i>Furthermore</i>	X

Key dos and don'ts: *lexical bundles*

Lexical bundles are short groups of words that are often used as set phrases.

You should learn the most common lexical bundles and use them in your writing when appropriate.

e.g.

Conversation and informal writing:

going to be a, I don't know what

Academic writing:

in order to, one of the, part of the, the number of, the presence of, the use of, the fact that, there is a, there is no, in the case of

Key dos and don'ts: *lexical bundles*

Which of these lexical bundles would(n't) you probably use or find in an essay?

- | | |
|----------------------|---|
| know what I mean | X |
| the nature of the | ✓ |
| as a result of | ✓ |
| it was in the | X |
| it is possible to | ✓ |
| have a look at | X |
| is based on the | ✓ |
| should be noted that | ✓ |
| are likely to be | ✓ |
| Can I have a | X |

Key dos and don'ts: *punctuation*

Use exclamation marks in informal writing such as informal letters. Without them, the tone can sound serious and dry.

Don't use exclamation marks in formal writing such as essays and reports.

In semi-formal articles and reviews, use them sparingly and only when really appropriate.
(No more than 2 per piece of writing?)

Key dos and don'ts: *punctuation*

At B2 level, there's no need to try to use semi-colons.

Many writers these days don't use semi-colons at all, so even at C1/C2 level, you may well not want to use semi-colons. That's fine.

However, if you are confident you know how to use them properly, a semi-colon in a formal piece of writing will definitely impress the examiner.

Key dos and don'ts: consistency

The essential thing with register is to be consistent throughout your piece of writing.

Decide on your register and level of formality before you start writing, and constantly check that you're sticking to it. Don't switch registers mid-text.

There is one major exception to this. What is it?

Answer: the register of direct speech in a story may be very different (more informal, more colloquial, etc) to the register of the narrator.

References

The Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English

The Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners

Cambridge ESOL First for Schools Handbook

Cambridge ESOL Proficiency Handbook

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