

Levels of formality (1)

The English-speaking world often operates at a semi-formal level. The language is friendly and welcoming, but with some formal expressions. However, when dealing with people outside the company and people that the writer has never met, formal English is used. Formal emails are also used in business transactions: purchasing, ordering, booking, apologizing, etc. In certain larger companies, formal writing is frequently used in emails sent among colleagues, especially when corresponding with people at different levels of the organization.

The following are some guidelines to help you identify and use formal email writing style.

Openings and closings

There are a number of common openings and closings to an email which will show you whether the author is being formal, informal, or semi-formal.

Contractions

When writing formal emails, do not use contractions, such as *I'm*, *he'd*, *you'll*, etc.

Formal *I am writing to ask if you have seen the news from Jo.*

Semi-formal / Informal *I'm writing to ask if you've seen the news from Jo.*

Modal verbs

To make requests and give instructions, formal English frequently uses modal verbs: *would*, *could* etc. However, note that modal verbs are also used in this way in informal and semi-formal English.

Formal *Would you be able to deliver the report by tomorrow?*

Semi-formal *Can you deliver the report by tomorrow?*

Formal *Could you ask Pierre to come to the meeting?*

Semi-formal *Can you ask Pierre to come to the meeting?*

Questions

In preference to asking a direct question, formal emails frequently use indirect questions.

Formal *I wonder if you would like to join us for dinner on Tuesday.*

Informal *Do you want to join us for dinner on Tuesday?*

Formal *Could you see if the components have been ordered yet?*

Informal *Have the components been ordered yet?*

In addition to this, offers are often made using *would*.

Formal *Would you like to see the new prototype?*

Informal *Do you want to see the new prototype?*

Opening sentences

After the greeting, English emails normally begin with an opening sentence.

Common opening sentences for a formal email are as follows.

- *I hope that all is well with you.*
- *I was just emailing to request some assistance.* (The past tense is frequently used to make a sentence more polite.)
- *Thank you for your email of 12 March.*

Emails that omit this opening sentence are usually official correspondence between governments and individuals, or formal demands for payment, etc.

Formal and informal vocabulary

Formal emails tend to use slightly different vocabulary to informal emails. Informal emails often use phrasal verbs and sound more like standard spoken English.

Formal *I would like to request some assistance.*

Informal *I'd like to ask for some help.*

Formal *Once I have received the information from our suppliers, I will reply to Mr Braun's email.*

Informal *After I hear back from the suppliers, I'll get back to Mr Braun.*

Certain terms have a formal or informal equivalent. Try not to mix informal and formal styles in the same email.

| Formal | Informal |
|--|--------------------------|
| Thank you | Thanks |
| I would like to apologize for ... | Sorry for ... |
| I would appreciate it if you ... | Can you ... ? |
| Would you happen to know ...? | Do you know ... ? |
| Unfortunately, I will not be able to ... | I can't ... |
| I am unable to say whether ... | I don't know whether ... |
| I would rather not ... | I don't want to ... |

Levels of formality (2)

Mistakes and apologies

Formal and semi-formal emails are also often used between people who know each other well when the writer is apologizing for a mistake. They are also used when a more senior colleague is being copied into the correspondence. Here are some common phrases used to start an apologizing email.

- *I am extremely sorry for the inconvenience caused.* (formal)
- *I am writing in order to apologize for ...* (formal)
Example *I am writing in order to apologize for the unfortunate mistake which occurred last week regarding the meeting in Paris.*
- *Please accept our apologies.*
Example *Please accept our apologies for the late delivery of your order.*
- *I am very sorry that ...* (formal / semi-formal)
Example *I am very sorry that your shop has not yet received the order.*
- *Please accept our apologies once again.* (formal / semi-formal – used as the sign-off to an email with an apology)

| Formal | Informal |
|---|---|
| May I make a request? | Could I ask you for something / some help? |
| I appreciate that this will be difficult for you. | I know that this is not going to be easy. |
| Would you be able to attend a meeting on the 4 th of June? | Can you meet up on the 4 th of June? |
| Please contact me at any time. | Feel free to call any time. |
| I would like to apologize for ... | Sorry for ... |