

Formal and colloquial language: introduction

Once you have a good level of English – and, if you are reading this, you almost certainly have – the challenge is to understand and use more colloquial forms of speech.

In speech and in less formal exchanges, shorter and simpler English words are used. These are frequently put together in phrases which carry specific meanings, which are natural and easy for native speakers of English, but not so easy for those learning the language. Here are some examples:

When are you off?

Is he up for that?

Native speakers of English are always using phrasal verbs like **take up**, **get out of**, **put off**, **be up for**, and so on:

I cannot get out of the meeting.

This usually does *not* mean that the person is stuck in the window or the door is locked. It means he or she is obliged to attend it.

Then there are English idioms, again used all the time, whose meanings may not be obvious to newcomers. Idioms tend to be colourful or physically descriptive:

Let's look on the bright side.

I'm not here to point the finger.

Let's not come to blows over this.

A few are used so often by British people that they have become clichés, and thus easier for you to recognize:

At the end of the day this is about profit.

We need to *sit down* and talk this through.

If you speak French, Italian, Portuguese or Spanish then it is likely that you will be comfortable with those longer words which have been borrowed from Latin. That is why you may find it easier to understand a professional report than a conversation in a pub. The reverse is true of people living in the UK, who are more comfortable with older native English words, shorter words and idiomatic phrasal expressions. For more on the origin of English words see the *Origins of English* worksheet.

Pair the formal expression with the informal one that means much the same. Then think up examples with your teacher:

agree with	end
discuss	go along with
exhibit	have a chat (<i>or</i> have a word with)
optimize	just the ticket
postpone	keep an eye on
punctual	make the most out of
resolve	off the cuff
spontaneous	on time
supervise	put off
terminate	show
very suitable	sort it out

Remember to use more native words in a presentation alongside the more formal words written in a display (see the *Presentations* worksheet).

The longer words are appropriate in formal and professional contexts, but avoid overuse. Too many can sound dull or even insincere. As with so many things, it is a balance.

The shorter, more native words are closer to the heart of the language, and as you get to know them the closer you are to the life and culture around you.

The diagram consists of two pairs of boxes. The first pair has a rectangular box on the left with formal text and an oval-shaped bubble on the right with informal text. The second pair has an oval-shaped bubble on the left with informal text and a rectangular box on the right with formal text.

Formal: We regret to inform you that the product is not functioning. Please advise what warranty or compensation rights we have.

Informal: It's not working. Do we get our money back?

Informal: I'm not here to point the finger.

Formal: It is not our intention to demonstrate the identity of the person culpable for this error.