Register In English Writing And How To Control It

The first question you may be asking is, what is register in English?

Language register in English is the scale of formality we use when we write and speak.

Register in linguistics is divided into five basic levels describing different types of register or formality definition in writing and speaking.
They are, high formal, formal, neutral, informal, and vulgar.

These are also sometimes called address registers because we use them to address people in different situations in life as a speaker or writer.

They work to increase the variety of a language as well as the appropriateness in writing and speaking.

The term register also defines the differences between when, why, and how we use formal or informal language in our day to day life.

The five basic English language register definition levels

High formal

It is the level of language that you would use in spoken English on formal occasions to address the Queen, an archbishop, president, or prime minister. It is also often used in legal correspondence, proceedings, and especially in a court of law.

Formal

You would use Formal language when you speak or write to your boss, a client, or in a transactional letter.

The formal language definition is sometimes called the consultative register. You use it when, for example, you are referring to or talking to your doctor and using the polite address of Dr.

Neutral

It is the formal or conventional language level you would use in transactional situations. The subject matter could include business letters, report writing, business plans, marketing presentations, or speaking to a client.

Informal

You use informal or casual register when you speak to or write emails and messages to friends, family, or work colleagues.

Vulgar

The vulgar definition is not the language of a smutty joke.

This intimate register refers to the type of language we use when we talk to immediate or close family members, very close friends, a child, or a family pet.

Although it is not covered in this article, there is one more form of register in English.

Frozen or static register

This is language use that remains unchanged due to custom or etiquette, particularly in printed or often repeated form.

Examples of the frozen register include biblical quotations, oaths of office, prayers, or a pledge of allegiance.

English register and the *you* problem

For writers, it is very important to know how to use the different formality levels. Register is a tool that you can use to develop a style, especially in dialogue, to give characters a consistent voice using natural language.

Unlike many Latin languages, which have dedicated formal and informal subject pronoun and verb conjugations, register in English uses a far more complex array of vocabulary and grammar structures to govern register.

In French, for instance, these two phrases that ask "how are you?" clearly identify formality because French has two forms of the second person subject pronoun, *you*.

Vous *allez bien?* **Formal**
Tu *vas bien?* **Informal**

The first is **formal** using ***vous*** and would be used with people who are not close friends, such as superiors, acquaintances, and strangers.
The second is **informal** using ***tu*** and it is used with family, close friends, and children.
In English however, we only have one second person subject pronoun, which is **you**.

How do you use and control register and formality consistently in English?
Language register, or formality definition, is controlled by using three language points. They are grammar, vocabulary, and punctuation.

These elements are common to all linguistic varieties of English international register.

The table below shows you the key differences between the basic formal and informal registers.

Register in English

Formal Features	Informal Features
Vocabulary Items	
Latin and French based words Uncommon words	Anglo Saxon words and phrasal verbs Common words
Punctuation	
Full words	Abbreviations Contractions
Grammar	
Passive constructions Noun phrases Complex sentences Indirect Questions	Active constructions Verb phrases Simple sentences Direct Questions

Explanation of register in English for writing and speaking

Vocabulary

For centuries in Britain, Anglo-Norman French was the language used by the aristocracy, law courts, formal education in schools, and universities and in some sections of the gentry. Latin was the language of business and the church.
At the time, English was classed as the language of the common people.

Because of this history of language in Britain, French, and to a lesser extent Latin have both remained integrated with modern English.

Therefore, the choice of words and verbs, in particular, based on their etymology govern modern English register.

Latin and French-based verbs are always one full word, quite long, and are generally used in formal writing and speaking.

Most single-word Anglo-Saxon verbs are recognizably very short. Think about to do, to hit, to put, to look, to give, to run, and to jump. These are informal.

English phrasal verbs are always a short verb plus one or two particles, which are mostly prepositions. Examples are, give up, call in, take off and get on with.

If we take a few Latin and French-based verbs such as to receive, to purchase, to comprehend, to appreciate, to tolerate, to schedule, to consider, to approve, and to accommodate, they are noticeably much longer.

These formal verbs would be replaced in informal register with to get, to buy, to get, to like, to put up with, to set up, to think about, to okay, and to put up.

Common and uncommon words are often words such as linking words. **And, but** and **so** are informal, while **furthermore, however**, and **therefore** are the formal equivalents.

What is vulgar language or vocabulary? Examples of common or vulgar words and expressions are, ta for thank you, ta-ta for goodbye, tummy for the stomach and belly button for the navel.

For vocabulary register, you can use this general rule of thumb.

You would use long words and verbs if you are wearing formal attire and you attend a formal dinner or formal garden party. But you would short words that are informal when conversing with friends or family at a picnic.

Punctuation

Register punctuation is defined as contraction and abbreviation both in writing and speaking. Without contractions or abbreviations, it is formal language, and with all contractions and abbreviations, it is informal.

While asap, memo and HQ are informal because they are abbreviations, as soon as possible, memorandum and headquarters are formal because they are written or said in full.

As for contraction, when speaking to a friend, one might say, "I wouldn't've baked a cake if I'd known you weren't coming."

But if this phrase were used when speaking to your boss it would change to the formal structure of, "I would not have arranged the meeting if I had known you would not be available."

Another example is that the modal verb **will** is **always** used in full in formal register, and always contracted in informal language. **We will arrive** as compared to **we'll arrive**.
The same rule applies to the verb can in the negative.

I can't come on Friday. **Informal**.
I cannot (or can not) attend on Friday. **Formal**.

Grammar

The structures noted in the table are mostly self-explanatory. But the ones that do need a little explanation are noun and verb phrases.

Simply put, a noun phrase uses an object as the subject of a phrase, and not a subject pronoun or name.

Often this results in creating the passive voice. For instance:

Joe and Charles attended the meeting. **Informal**.
The meeting was attended by Joe and Charles. **Formal**.
Joe and Charles thought the meeting was a success. **Informal**.
The meeting was thought to have been a success. **Formal**.
Robert Mortimer built the house in 1789. **Informal**.
The house was built in 1789 by Robert Mortimer. **Formal**.
Mary and Ryan went to a formal dance on Saturday. **Informal**.
The formal dance was attended by Mary and Ryan. **Formal**.

Another important grammar point is in constructing correct indirect questions.

Care should always be taken to ensure that only one question structure is used in the complete phrase.

This always means structuring the first verb phrase as the question and the second verb phrase in statement order. It is a [common cause of grammar mistakes](#).
In the two examples below, the first moves the verb **to be**, and in the second, the auxiliary **do** is dropped in the indirect or polite question form.

What **is** your name? **This is a direct informal question.**
Could you please tell me what your name **is**? **This is an indirect formal question.**
Do you have time for a quick chat? **This is a direct informal question.**
I was wondering if you have time for a quick discussion? **This is an indirect formal question.**

Inversion sentences and clauses are also quite common in formal writing but are rare in any form of informal discourse.
On the other hand, question tags are always classed as informal.

Highlighting the differences in language register formality

When you learn how to write a formal letter there are a number of conventions you need to follow.

With formal letter writing you know that you should write Dear Sir or Madam before the first paragraph of your letter and Yours sincerely or Yours faithfully at the end.

Depending on letter format styles in different countries, you might put the street address of the person in the top right-hand corner of the page.

The sender's address would then be on the left.

For some, it is a good idea to left justify the body of the letter. For others, it could be to fully justify so that the text is equally spaced on both sides of the page.

For a business letter or cover letter, there are many options and standards. However, these rules and guides are not governed by the use of register in writing. Salutations and layout are protocols that can differ greatly from country to country.

However, when it comes to writing the letter, the body of the text will use register to control formal writing.

Here are two example forms of a letter, without salutations. Both are concerning the same subjects but written in different registers.

Example formal letter

Thank you for your letter we received on the 14th of September 2018.
A copy has been sent to company headquarters in addition to a memorandum concerning your financial situation.
A meeting has been scheduled for the 3rd October 2018 at 11 am to discuss your request for a further bank loan. Therefore, please inform us of your availability for this meeting at the earliest opportunity.
However, a number of issues concerning your income and expenditure may be queried prior to a loan being granted.
Furthermore, the General Manager needs to be contacted in order to authorize bank loans of this nature. Moreover, your previous failure to meet payment arrangements will first have to be considered.
Nevertheless, in the interim, you are required to complete the enclosed business plan, which should be brought to the meeting.

Example informal letter

Thanks for your letter. We got it on 14 Sept.
We've sent a copy to comp. H.Q. along with a memo re. your financial situation.
I've set a meeting for 3 Oct at 11 am to talk about another bank loan.

So, please let us know if you can make it a.s.a.p. But, we might ask you a few things to do with your inc. and exp. before giving you a loan.
Also, I need to get in touch with the G.M. to okay it.
Plus, we'll first have to think about the last time you didn't keep up with your payments. Anyway, in the meantime, you need to fill in this business plan.
Bring it to the meeting with you.

Compare the changes from the first letter to the second letter to understand how the formality has been changed by the use of grammar, vocabulary, and punctuation.

Summary

The ability to maintain consistent register is a skill all writers need to master. It is a way to avoid long descriptive phrases of how a character says something. Or worse, using adverbs to describe how a character speaks.

Register allows a fiction writer to maintain a consistent *voice* for characters and to give consistency to the narrative. All of this can be controlled by the correct use and control of register in English.

If you are writing fiction and your character is wearing a suit or a formal dress, they should probably be using formal register. If they are dressed in jeans and a t-shirt, then perhaps informal or even vulgar language would be more suitable.

The most important point to remember is that you should never mix formal and informal registers. You can refer to the table above to ensure that you stay in your selected level of formality.

While there are some minor differences in register between United States and British English, the basic rules of maintaining register are relatively consistent across all forms of English.