

Mastering Formal and Informal Writing for Exams

When preparing for exams, understanding the difference between formal and informal writing can make a significant difference in your performance. Both styles have their distinct features and are suitable for different contexts. In this blog post, we will explore the key characteristics of formal and informal writing, and provide tips on how to excel in both for your exams.

Understanding Formal Writing

Formal writing is the style typically used in reports, articles, reviews, essays and letters or emails to officials such as newspaper editors or teachers. It adheres to standard grammar and vocabulary rules and maintains a tone of objectivity and seriousness. Here are some key features:

- **Structure and Organisation:** Formal writing follows a clear and logical structure, often with well-defined sections such as introduction, body, and conclusion.
- **Language and Tone:** The language used is precise, objective, and free from colloquialisms or slang. The tone is respectful and serious.
- **Complex Sentences:** Sentences tend to be longer and more complex, often using passive voice to maintain objectivity.
- **Vocabulary:** Uses advanced and varied vocabulary, avoiding contractions (e.g., "cannot" instead of "can't").
- **Evidence and References:** When making claims, formal writing supports them with evidence and proper citations.

Example of Formal Writing:

"Researchers have demonstrated a significant correlation between regular exercise and improved mental health outcomes. This relationship is particularly evident in longitudinal studies where participants who engaged in consistent physical activity reported lower levels of stress and anxiety."

Understanding Informal Writing

Informal writing, on the other hand, is more relaxed and conversational. It is often used in personal emails, text messages, and some creative writing contexts. Here are its main characteristics:

- **Tone and Style:** Informal writing has a friendly and conversational tone. It's more personal and often includes opinions and emotions.
- **Sentence Structure:** Sentences are usually shorter and simpler. Contractions and colloquial expressions are common.

- Vocabulary: Utilises everyday language, including idioms and slang.
- Flexibility: There is more flexibility in the structure, and it might not follow strict grammatical rules.
- Direct Address: Often addresses the reader directly using second-person pronouns like "you."

Example of Informal Writing:

"Hey there! Just wanted to let you know about this amazing book I read. It's all about how staying active can boost your mood. Trust me, it's worth checking out!"

Tips for Writing Formal and Informal Styles in Exams

Formal Writing Tips:

- Plan Your Essay: Before you start writing, create an outline to organise your thoughts logically.
- Use Proper Vocabulary: Stick to formal vocabulary and avoid slang or colloquial expressions.
- Maintain Objectivity: Write in the third person and use passive voice to keep the tone impersonal.
- Check Your Grammar: Proofread your work to ensure it adheres to standard grammar rules.
- Support Your Points: Use evidence and references to back up your arguments.

Informal Writing Tips:

- Engage Your Reader: Write as if you're having a conversation with your reader. Use questions and direct address to engage them.
- Be Personal and Friendly: Don't be afraid to show your personality and use a relaxed tone.
- Use Simple Sentences: Keep your sentences short and to the point.
- Incorporate Colloquialisms: Feel free to use idioms and slang appropriate to the context.
- Keep It Flexible: Unlike formal writing, informal writing doesn't require strict adherence to structure. Be creative!

Choosing the Right Style

In an exam setting, the key to choosing the right style depends on the context of the question. Formal writing is typically required for essays, reports, and any response that demands a serious, academic tone. Informal writing might be more suitable for creative writing tasks, personal reflections, or when a conversational tone is requested.

Practice Makes Perfect

Like any other skill, mastering formal and informal writing takes practice. Try writing on various topics, switching between formal and informal styles. Seek feedback from teachers or peers to refine your writing. With consistent practice, you'll find it easier to switch between the two styles seamlessly.

Understanding when and how to use formal and informal writing will not only help you score better in exams but also enhance your overall communication skills. So, start practising today and become a versatile writer capable of adapting to any context. Good luck!

Now let's test your knowledge, take a look at the following writing questions that are in the style of Cambridge and LanguageCert exams and identify if you need to use formal or informal language. After doing this why not have a go at writing a response to the questions!

1. Read the following notice in your school bulletin:

Write a letter to the school magazine to participate in the upcoming essay competition.

- Provide your chosen topic
- Explain why it's meaningful to you
- Express your excitement about the competition.

Write between 70-100 words.

2. Write an email to a relative. Recommend a historical site in your city and explain why you believe it's worth visiting.

Write between 100-120 words.

3. You recently had a surprising revelation about a friend. Write a letter to your friend in England explaining the unexpected discovery and your emotions afterward. Discuss what you learned, why it was surprising, and how it affected your relationship. Write between 150-200 words.
4. Imagine you visited the sports centre with your classmates.

Write a review for the school magazine, focusing on:

- the quality of equipment
- ease of access

- the centre's general atmosphere.

Discuss the facilities that impressed your friends and how the centre promotes a positive and energetic environment.

Write between 100-150 words.

5. You come across alarming statistics on air pollution in your city.

Write an article for your school website addressing the issue, emphasising the consequences of poor air quality. Propose practical solutions to reduce air pollution and encourage a healthier environment.

Write between 150-200 words.

6. You come across the following quote about perseverance:

“It always seems impossible until it is done.”

Write a letter to your best friend sharing your emotional response to the quote and recounting a personal experience where the message of perseverance resonated with you. Reflect on the impact it had on your mindset and actions.

Write between 250-300 words.

Answer key:

1. Formal
2. Informal
3. Informal
4. Formal
5. Formal
6. Informal