By David Park

Identifying & using formal & informal vocabulary

A student preparing for IELTS (International English Language Testing System) sent me this query: *"I don't know if 'spark off' is a formal word or not. How can I tell the difference between formal and informal words?"* Here's what I said to her in my reply:

English has three main styles: formal, informal and popular.

Formal English

Formal English is mainly used in writing. This style is academic in tone and is commonly used in academic textbooks, most university essays, business letters and contracts.

In the case of speaking, formal English is usually only used for official or serious occasions, e.g., to formally welcome guests at a university graduation ceremony.

Formal English uses more complex vocabulary than everyday speech. For example, it uses many "bigger" words that aren't normally used in conversation. Examples are multi-syllable words like **compensate**, **ascend** and **interrogate**. It also prefers one-part verbs (e.g., **establish**) instead of simpler, phrasal verbs (e.g., **set up**). Slang and colloquial vocabulary are avoided.

When formal English is used in writing, sentences tend to be long and complex, and grammar rules are followed strictly. It tends to be impersonal (or neutral), often using impersonal pronouns like **it** and passive verbs. Contracted and abbreviated forms of words are usually avoided.

Informal & popular English

Informal English is the language spoken by most people every day. It's also widely used in emails and letters to friends.

Speakers of informal English aren't very concerned about their vocabulary. For example, informal English uses many short words (e.g., **fire**, **climb** and **ask**), much colloquial vocabulary (e.g., **stuff**, **a lot of**, **thing** and **sort of**) and multi-part verbs (e.g., **set up** instead of **establish**). Informal English is also more relaxed about grammar rules than formal English, using simpler grammatical structures and loosely-connected sentences and phrases.

When used in writing, informal English uses first and second person points-of-view (e.g., **I**, **you** and **we**) to create a more personal style than formal English. Contractions (e.g., **it's** instead of **it is**) are also very common. As well, informal English tends to use shorter sentences than in more formal writing, and the more formal punctuation marks − the semi-colon (;) and colon (:) − are usually avoided.

Popular English is rarely used in writing, being used mostly in spoken English. It includes a good bit of slang. Slang is words or expressions that are very informal and are not considered suitable for polite speech or more formal situations. Slang is often used only by particular social groups or professions.

More on phrasal verbs

When people speak or write informally, they often use phrasal verbs (also called multi-word or multi-part verbs). Here are some examples. The formal, one-word verb with the same meaning is in brackets.

Phrasal verbs & single-word equivalents

ask for (request)	go down with (contract)
set up (establish)	deal with (handle)
find out (discover)	take in (deceive)

Phrasal verbs are very common in spoken English. However, they're usually less formal than their one-word verb equivalents.

In formal writing, writers often prefer to use single-word verbs, such as **examine** or **devise**, rather than phrasal verbs, such as **look at** or **come up with**. Compare the pairs of verbs in the table on the next page.

Though there's a tendency to use fewer phrasal verbs in formal language, it's not wrong to use them. Nevertheless, if there's a one-word verb that's more formal, then use it.

Don't think that a few phrasal verbs in your IELTS writing will make it too informal. In fact, there are many situations - even in quite formal texts - when a phrasal verb is the most natural-sounding way of expressing an idea. For instance, **put on** is much more natural than the formal, single-word equivalent **don**.

Informal	More formal
He **checked up on** his accountant.	He **investigated** his accountant.
They **put up with** their neighbours.	They **tolerated** their neighbours.
She **caught on** very quickly.	She **understood** very quickly.
She **made up for** it with an early night.	She **compensated** for it with an early night.
He **went down with** a fever.	He **contracted** a fever.
The cost of living **went up**.	The cost of living **increased/ rose**.

Telling the difference

It's usually easy to decide if a word is informal or formal. Informal words are those common, ordinary and familiar words that people use every day, whereas formal words tend to be the more "serious" and less frequently used words. Often, formal words are longer than informal words. Single-word verbs are also usually more formal than their phrasal verb equivalents.

For instance, saying something is **enormous** is formal, but saying it's **whopping** is informal. Phrases like **on the one hand** or **as indicated above** are formal, but phrases like **by the way** or **that reminds me** are informal.

Note that some informal words are more formal than other informal words. The informal verb **understand**, for example, is more formal than the informal verb **get**. However, both are less formal than the formal verb **comprehend**.

IELTS uses a semi-formal style

The IELTS website (www.ielts.org) says academic essays may use "a neutral or slightly formal style of writing."

This means your IELTS academic writing may use slightly less formal vocabulary (e.g., phrasal verbs like **spark off** instead of **cause**) as well as words that are more formal. It may also use the complex grammar of formal English, or it may use slightly simpler grammatical structures.

However, the more formal the vocabulary and the more complex the grammar is, the higher the IELTS score. In the case of vocabulary, for instance, the scoring scheme gives higher scores when "less common" or "uncommon lexical items" (words or phrases) are used − which is what formal vocabulary is. Visit http://tinyurl.com/4uddkz to see the scoring scheme.

Here's my advice for vocabulary for academic essays in the IELTS exam:

- Use a more formal one-word verb if it sounds more appropriate than its phrasal verb equivalent.

- Avoid using a personal or conversational style (as if you're talking to the examiner). Therefore, try not to use words like **I**, **me**, **my**, **you**, **we, us** and **our**. Though these words are widely used in informal writing and in spoken English, they're generally thought to be too personal and too casual for formal, academic writing.

  If you wish, you may use the pronoun **I** to introduce your opinions. However, I recommend that you limit its use to the introduction and the closing paragraph. That way, you'll avoid the risk of making your essay sound too conversational or overly personal.

- Avoid words or phrases used mainly in normal conversation as they're usually not suitable for use in academic writing. Dictionaries often identify these words with the label "informal." In your essay, use a more formal equivalent. Here are some examples:

Avoid	Use
kids	children
OK	all right; acceptable
a lot of	much; many
heaps	many; a great deal

- Never use colloquial English or slang. Colloquial English is a type of informal English, and it includes words such as **gonna** or **wanna**, and phrases such as **ain't nothin'** and **dead as a doornail**. Dictionaries usually mark colloquial words and phrases with a label like "colloq." Because colloquial English and slang are usually spoken rather than written, they'll make your academic writing sound too conversational and so less credible.

- Although it's usual to contract words in spoken and informal written English (e.g., **can't**, **won't**, **shouldn't** and **hasn't**), it's better to avoid using any contractions in your academic essay.

- Avoid abbreviating words in academic writing. Don't say **yrs**, **e.g.** (which stands for the original Latin *exempli gratia* and means "for example") or **i.e.** (which stands for the original Latin *id est* and means "that is"). Instead, write the words in full using their English equivalents (**years**, **for example** and **that is**).