



LEVELS OF USAGE

Picture the scene. A distinguished journalist has won a Pulitzer Prize for his undercover work in Iraq. A banquet is given in his honor by the alumni society of his university. The audience includes several senators, the mayor of the city, business leaders, and even a few celebrities, all dressed in crisp, evening formalwear. The editor of the paper has been asked to publicly award the journalist a check for \$50,000 as an expression of the community's gratitude for his bravery and service.

The moment has arrived. The editor stands at his table, pulls an envelope from his pocket, and raises his glass as a signal for silence. The guests become quiet and lean forward with expectation.

The editor clears his throat and says, *"On behalf of my distinguished colleagues in the city of Philadelphia and throughout the United States, it is with great pleasure that I congratulate you, Sir, on your outstanding achievement, and bestow on you this token of our appreciation for the extraordinary means undertaken to bring about its accomplishment."*

Deafening applause surrounds the journalist as he shakes his colleague's hand, pockets the check, and sits down.

Later that evening as the guests are mingling, the mayor walks up to the journalist, hands him a gold watch, shakes his hand, and says: "Well done! Here's my gift to show my thanks for your service."

Next morning at the office, the journalist's boss and long-time friend slaps him on the back, hands him a set of plane tickets to Hawaii and says, "Good job, man! Here's a little something for your hard work. Treat your wife and kids to a little vacation."

Three different people, three different occasions, same purpose, same journalist, but not the same Standard English. In fact, the scene above illustrates three levels of Standard English usage, each adapted to a particular occasion and audience. Knowing how to use each type under the right circumstances is an important part of mastering the language.

Here is your goal for this lesson:

- Determine appropriate language usage based on real-life scenarios.

VO·CAB·U·LAR·Y

VOCABULARY

colloquial language an informal, often nonstandard, variety of conversational English



Vocab Arcade

Formal Usage

The editor at the banquet used formal Standard English when he gave the journalist the community's gift. Let's look at what he says again:

"On behalf of my distinguished colleagues in the city of Philadelphia and throughout the United States, it is with great pleasure that I congratulate you, Sir, on your outstanding achievement, and bestow on you this token of our appreciation for the extraordinary means undertaken to bring about its accomplishment."

We can learn a number of things about formal Standard English from the editor's words.

- Formal Standard English is used for very specific purposes on very specific occasions.** Formal English is language set apart. In this case it was used at a banquet, itself a highly formal occasion where the way one dresses and behaves is intended to match the high importance and significance of the event. The language was used by an individual, chosen to represent the community in extending thanks and congratulations to the guest of honor. Such language *must* match the evening dress, the crystal and china, the dignity of the guests, and the high level of talent and excellence for which the journalist is being honored.
- Formal English follows a form.** *Form* simply means following a prescribed way of doing something, like writing a letter. On this occasion, the language was congratulatory—following the form traditionally used to convey an award and thanks. Here's its basic structure:

<i>On behalf of . . .</i>	a statement of whom the speaker represents
<i>I congratulate you . . .</i>	a statement of congratulations
<i>. . . on your . . . achievement</i>	a statement of the purpose of congratulations
<i>. . . and bestow this token</i>	a description of the award
<i>. . . for the extraordinary means . . .</i>	a statement of the purpose of the award

While some of the elements can vary, the statement of whom the speaker represents always precedes anything else. The statement *I congratulate you . . .* will appear somewhere.

- Formal English vocabulary emphasizes the specialized nature of the purpose it serves.** The editor's congratulatory language is what some would call "flowery." It forms one long, elaborate sentence. It purposely uses lots of words specifically chosen to slow things down, "decorate" the moment, and convey honor. Phrases like *on behalf of my distinguished colleagues* and *extraordinary means undertaken* are "form" phrases that have been used for many years to perform this type of service. Some of the words like *bestow* are archaic—old-fashioned as it were, part of a long-standing tradition, and definitely not your everyday English.
- Formal English comes in a variety of shapes and sizes.** The example we've looked at is *spoken* formal English. Other examples of this variety include the language of weddings, baptisms, and other religious ceremonies, board meetings, government proceedings, courtroom trials, graduations, funerals, and other important occasions.

Informal Usage

After the banquet, the mayor walks up to the journalist, shakes his hand, hands him a gift (a gold watch) and says, *"Well done! Here's my gift to show my thanks for your service."*

Why is the mayor's language different from the editor's? For one thing, he is not speaking on *behalf* of anyone other than himself. For another, the banquet is now over and the guests are leaving. The formal occasion is at an end, so it's appropriate to "shift gears" and use language that better fits a less formal setting, such as a spontaneous conversation.

Note that the mayor's congratulations serve much the same purpose as the editor's; however, the words are far fewer, simpler, and less ceremonious. The mayor even uses a contraction—*here's*—a usage accepted in informal Standard English but not in formal varieties.

From these observations we can conclude that:

- Informal Standard English is Standard English without prescribed form.** The mayor could have spoken his thanks and congratulations in several ways. He wasn't restricted to a particular form, since a less formal occasion allows for more flexibility in how language is used.
- Informal Standard English is the language of public conversation.** The mayor and the journalist had met a couple of times before, but they didn't know each other particularly well. Speaking as an equal on this occasion (rather than as civil servant to civilian), the mayor used language that communicated competency, respect, and an awareness that he was in public, speaking to an honored guest.

Colloquial Usage

The next morning at the office, the journalist's boss and long-time friend slaps him on the back, hands him a set of plane tickets to Hawaii and says, *"Good job, man! Here's a little somethin' for your hard work. Treat your wife and kids to a little vacation."*

Why is the boss's language different from the editor's and the mayor's? Certainly, he is doing the same thing—congratulating the journalist and giving him a gift. The difference is the setting and the occasion. The boss, like the mayor, is speaking for himself, not a large group of people; however, the setting is now even less formal than the conversation with the mayor. The boss also knows the journalist well, being his overseer, co-worker, and good friend. After all, you don't just slap anyone on the back, especially a Pulitzer Prize winner.

Notice the characteristics of the boss's *colloquial language*. His emphatic *"Good job, man!"* expresses the same meaning as the mayor's *"Well Done!"* and the editor's *"outstanding achievement,"* but the boss says it in a casual way matching the more laid back setting and communicating the warmth and pride of a friend. His phrase *"Here's a little somethin' for your hard work"* purposely understates the gift and the idea that the journalist has indeed accomplished something extraordinary. A friend would do this. Why make the journalist feel more embarrassed than he already does?

Notice also the boss's vocabulary and pronunciation. *Man* is a redeemed slang term. *Here's* is a contraction. *Something* is pronounced *somethin'*, (the -g is dropped). *A little something* is a homey idiomatic phrase. All of these are characteristic features of colloquial English. None of them could be said to be precise language, and yet they're the right words for the audience and occasion.

Colloquial English represents the borderline between Standard and nonstandard English. Because this variety is generally used in casual conversation, many regionalisms and even some slang find their way into the language. Colloquial English is generally not used in written Standard English, unless the author is creating dialogue or intentionally trying to make other kinds of writing sound conversational.

Question #1 Text/MultipleChoice

Show Answer

In the blank provided, choose the term which best completes the description.

language is used for everyday conversations in public places.

Question #2 Text/MultipleChoice

Show Answer

In the blank provided, choose the term which best completes the description.

language follows a specific form.

Question #3 Text/MultipleChoice

Show Answer

In the blank provided, choose the term which best completes the description.

language uses some colloquialism and slang.

Question #4 Text/MultipleChoice

Show Answer

In the blank provided, choose the term which best completes the description.

language uses precise vocabulary.

Question #5 Text/MultipleChoice

Show Answer

In the blank provided, choose the term which best completes the description.

language is used for ceremonies and other important occasions.

Question #6 Text/MultipleChoice

Show Answer

In the blank provided, choose the term which best completes the description.

language is used in casual settings.

Question #7 Text/MultipleChoice

Show Answer

In the blank provided, choose the term which best completes the description.

English is Standard English without precise vocabulary or specific form.

Question #8 Text/MultipleChoice

Show Answer

In the blank provided, choose the term which best completes the description.

language is demonstrated by the statement: *"This is my buddy Jon."*

Question #9 Text/MultipleChoice

Show Answer

In the blank provided, choose the term which best completes the description.

language is demonstrated by the statement: *"I'd like you to meet John and Betty Smith."*

Question #10 Text/MultipleChoice

Show Answer

In the blank provided, choose the term which best completes the description.

language is demonstrated by the statement: *"Please allow me to introduce Mr. and Mrs. Sterling Baughm."*