



## 1 On Your Marks!

### Objective

To recognise vocabulary and structures that are Standard English, and also vocabulary and structures that are appropriate for formal speech and writing.

### Key definition

Formal language is a register of language that is appropriate for formal purposes and settings. It features Standard English rather than slang or dialect, and uses more precise or polite vocabulary. Formal language also avoids contractions and personal remarks or opinions.

## 2 Get Ready

### Prior knowledge

Children should have a solid understanding of the following.

- basic sentence grammar
- the conventions of written language
- purpose and audience

Recap previous grammar knowledge acquired and touch on areas of uncertainty highlighted in the Diagnostic Check, particularly areas of non-standard grammar (e.g. subject-verb agreement) and the ways in which written language differs from speech.

Explain that this session will teach how to identify Standard English and formal language.

### Terminology

Standard English is not necessarily formal, but it avoids language common to casual speech (like slang, colloquialisms and dialect – see below) and is always grammatically correct. Standard English has nothing to do with accent.

For example, the sentence '**I ain't gonna go unless I know who with**' is not Standard English. It would have to change to '**I am not going to go unless I know with whom**' or '**I'm not going to go unless I know with**



**whom**. 'I'm' is Standard English because it is a recognised contraction – unlike 'ain't'. Using '**who with**' rather than '**with whom**' is not Standard English because it is not grammatically correct, although it is far more common in speech and informal writing.

Slang or colloquial language is language that is non-standard, casual and often restricted to an area, a social group and/or a time period. **Dialect** is language specific to a geographical area.

Personal and impersonal language should not be confused with degrees of formality. Impersonal language avoids use of pronouns such as 'I' or 'you'. For example, '**When I switch on the bulb, it lights up**' is personal; '**When the bulb is switched on, it lights up**' is impersonal.

## Purpose and application

Standard English can be adapted to a multitude of different tasks and degrees of formality, while still retaining its basic grammatical structure. It is used in almost all written language and most conversation.

Formal Standard English is used for a variety of purposes, some of which require complete lack of reference to the personal (such as a scientific report), while others are entirely personal (such as an after-dinner speech). It is important to understand the appropriate levels of formality and impersonality in speech and writing, in order that writing be properly adapted to task and audience.

## 3 Get Set

### Resources

- The *Formal Language* diagnostic check PDF
- This *Formal Language* teaching sequence
- The *Using Formal Language* video
- The *Using Formal Language* game sequence (see below)
- The *Formal Language* assessment PDF
- Shared text (a current literacy or cross-curricular text)
- Mini white-boards and sentence strips

### Activities

**1.** Listen to clips of BBC radio news and ask children to try to spot any slang terms or local dialect. They may hear it in interviews or quotes, but should notice that the newsreader uses none.



# Formal Language, Part 1

Next, provide children with simple scenarios that require conversation (e.g. getting directions or discussing a holiday). Children must then improvise the brief discussion using as many slang and/or dialect expressions as possible.

Have them hold exactly the same conversations using only Standard English (they could pretend to be BBC newsreaders!). Remind them that the task is not about putting on a 'posh' accent: they should use their own, and think about word choice and grammar instead.

Have pairs present both versions of their discussions. Use peer assessment to evaluate the accuracy of the Standard English version.

**2.** Before the lesson, select as many paragraphs from non-fiction texts on the same subject area as you can, ensuring they exemplify different degrees of formality. Invite comment on the intended audience for each. Have children note words and particularly phrases or sentences that create the more, or less, formal tone.

Working in smaller groups or pairs, children should sort some paragraphs by degree of formality, selecting examples of what helped them make the decision. As a whole class, try to create one large-scale continuum of all the passages, from most to least formal. Children should discuss the indicative language they found, and its intended purpose.

**3.** One at a time, display sentences that exemplify more or less formal forms of Standard English, and some that display slang or dialect. In each case, children should discuss and point out the words and phrases that have decided the sentence's formality. Children should also suggest appropriate contexts and audiences for each sentence. Allow children to evaluate each other's attempts.

## Practising with the Bug

Game	Skill
<i>Using Formal Language Game 1</i>	Distinguish Standard English (heard and read) from non-standard forms. Understand the necessity of Standard English to formal composition.
<i>Using Formal Language Game 2</i>	Identify formal language as distinct from informal language, where Standard English is common to all.



## 4. Go!

### **Noticing Standard English and Formal Language**

In independent, guided-group or cross-curricular reading, children should try to spot slang terminology and other non-standard forms of grammar. They should also take note of the degrees of formality and impersonality. Where do they appear? Which types of writing appear to be most formal or impersonal, and why?

### **Shared reading**

Make a point of noting Standard English grammar in the vast majority of reading in all curriculum areas. Occasionally, ask children to offer a non-standard replacement for a sentence and ask why this would be inappropriate.

Note also that instances of non-standard grammar and slang terms are largely confined to direct speech in narrative, and dialogue in plays.

### **Shared writing**

When joint-composing narrative, contrast the Standard English used for narration and the non-standard forms that may be used within speech. Model the use of some slang or dialect in personal diary writing, but keep this limited.

In all other forms of writing, challenge and support children to compose in Standard English.

### **Independent reading and writing**

Very nearly all the forms of writing children use at school require Standard English. When they are writing, ask children to contrast their narration with speech, and use non-standard forms to show character within dialogue.

This difference can be seen when children are reading play scripts, in which characters may or may not use slang and dialect. However, all stage directions, and any narration, will be in Standard English.

Limited amounts of slang and/or dialect can be used in informal forms of writing, like personal recounts, emails and diary entries.

In scientific or other fact-based reading and writing, have children try to spot formality and impersonality in the language, with more technical terminology and absolutely no contractions.