**108. Formal and Informal Words**

.

[](https://guinlist.files.wordpress.com/2015/06/remove.png)

**REMOVE = TAKE AWAY**

Many informal English words have a Latin-derived formal synonym

.

**THE NATURE & USE OF FORMAL WORDS**

Sometimes the difference between two words of similar meaning is not so much what they mean as where they are used (see [**16. Ways of Distinguishing Similar Words**](https://guinlist.wordpress.com/2011/11/23/ways-of-distinguishing-similar-words/)). This is the case, for example, with ***scapulas***and***shoulder blades***, the former being common in medical English, the latter in everyday speech (see [**77. Apposition**](https://guinlist.wordpress.com/2014/04/21/77-apposition-pairing-of-same-meaning-nouns/)).

A large area of English that often expresses meanings with different words from those of ordinary speech (and occasionally with different grammar too) is academic and professional writing. Its special language is, in fact, the basis of the “formal style” that it is said to normally have. A very important point about this language is that it is not something impressive to achieve, but rather a means of avoiding certain kinds of undesirable language. Hence knowing what language is undesirable in formal writing is at least as important as knowing what to replace it with (see [**46. How to Avoid “I”, “We” and “You”**](https://guinlist.wordpress.com/2013/02/18/46-how-to-avoid-i-we-and-you/)).

An interesting feature of formal-sounding words is that they are usually derived from Latin, the language of the ancient Roman rulers of Europe 2000 years ago, rather than Old English. Most were imported into English via French after England came under French-speaking monarchs 1000 years ago (see [**135. French Influences on English Vocabulary**](https://guinlist.wordpress.com/2016/07/11/135-french-influences-on-english-vocabulary/)). This link between formal language and historical rulers of England makes sense because both represent power.

An earlier Guinlist post ([**45. Latin Clues to English Spelling**](https://guinlist.wordpress.com/2013/02/04/45-latin-clues-to-english-spelling/)) looks at the spelling of Latin-derived words in formal English. A later one ([**130. Formal Abbreviations**](https://guinlist.wordpress.com/2016/05/02/130-formal-abbreviations/)) presents common Latin abbreviations in this kind of English. In this post I wish to look in more detail at how “Latinate” words typically replace non-Latinate words in English so as to achieve formality.

.

**FORMAL EQUIVALENTS OF TWO-WORD VERBS**

A very large category of formal English words is Latinate verbs with the same meaning as everyday two-word verbs. Two-word verbs tend to be combinations of simple English verbs with either a preposition (making “prepositional” verbs like LEAD TO and COPE WITH – see [**84. Seven Things to Know about Prepositions**](https://guinlist.wordpress.com/2014/07/28/84-seven-things-to-know-about-prepositions/)) or an adverb (making “phrasal” verbs like MAKE OUT or GIVE UP – see [**139. Phrasal Verbs**](https://guinlist.wordpress.com/2016/09/05/139-phrasal-verbs/)). Prepositional verbs always have a following noun (”object”), which must be placed after the preposition, whereas phrasal verbs may have no object, and if there is one, it may come before the adverb as well as after.

Latinate verbs have various recognizable features. Many are combinations of a Latin preposition, such as ***ex-, con-***or***ab-***, and a simple Latin verb like ***duc, tain***or***pel***(for more, see [**45. Latin Clues to English Spelling**](https://guinlist.wordpress.com/2013/02/04/45-latin-clues-to-english-spelling/)). Ability to be made into a noun with ***-ment, -ence, -ance, -al, -sion, -tion***or***-ation*** is also a good clue.

Here are some common two-word verbs and their Latinate equivalents:

.

**1. Prepositional Verbs**

ASK FOR = REQUEST

COME AFTER = FOLLOW

COME UP TO = REACH/ATTAIN

DEAL WITH = MANAGE

GO BEFORE = PRECEDE

GO OUT OF = EXIT

LEAD TO = CAUSE

LOOK AT = REGARD

LOOK FOR = SEEK

LOOK INTO = INVESTIGATE

LOOK LIKE = RESEMBLE

PUT UP WITH = TOLERATE

REFER TO = CONSULT

SETTLE FOR = CHOOSE

SPEAK TO = ADDRESS

TALK ABOUT = DISCUSS/CONSIDER

THINK ABOUT = CONSIDER/PONDER

THINK OF = CONCEIVE

WAIT FOR = AWAIT

.

**2. Phrasal Verbs**

BREAK DOWN = FAIL/COLLAPSE

BREAK OFF = SUSPEND/ADJOURN

BREAK UP = DISINTEGRATE

BRING IN = INTRODUCE

COME BACK = RETURN

COME/GO IN = ENTER

GET AWAY = ESCAPE

*GO* AHEAD = PROCEED

GO AWAY = LEAVE/DEPART

GIVE/BRING BACK = RETURN

GIVE IN = YIELD

GIVE OUT = DISTRIBUTE

GIVE UP = QUIT

LINK UP = CONNECT

[MAKE OUT = DISCERN](https://guinlist.wordpress.com/2016/10/03/141-ways-of-using-make/)

[MAKE UP = INVENT](https://guinlist.wordpress.com/2016/10/03/141-ways-of-using-make/)

PUT/SET DOWN = DEPOSIT

SET OUT (1) = DISPLAY

SET OUT (2) = DEPART

TAKE AWAY = REMOVE

THROW AWAY = DISCARD

THROW OUT = EJECT

.

A notable trend among phrasal verbs is the likelihood of those with ***back*** to match Latinate verbs with ***re-***. Thus, GO BACK = RETURN, GET BACK = REGAIN, LOOK BACK = REVIEW, PUSH BACK = REPEL and SEND BACK = RETURN.

English has many other two-word verbs with a Latinate equivalent. If in formal writing you can think only of a two-word verb for the meaning you want, you can try consulting a thesaurus for a one-word equivalent. Note, though, that some two-word verbs contain a Latinate verb and are likely as a result not to be informal. Examples are ALLUDE TO, APPROVE OF, DEPEND ON, DISPENSE WITH, DISPOSE OF, INSIST ON and RESULT IN.

.

**FORMAL QUANTITY WORDS**

Another area of English that often has formal and informal equivalents is adverbs showing different strengths of a following adjective or adverb – so-called “adverbs of degree”. Consider this example:

**(a) The task was a bit easier than before.**

The underlined words are very informal. It is more formal to say ***a little***, and more formal again to say ***slightly*** (a word of English rather than Latin origin).The main adverbs of degree that possess a more formal equivalent are as follows. The underlined ones are especially conversational.

***a bit/a little = slightly***

***pretty/quite/fairly/rather = appreciably, moderately***

***really/very = extremely, hugely***

***a lot/far/much***(+ comparative)***= considerably***

More about the difference between ***very***and***much*** is in the post [**98. “Very”, “Much” and “Very Much”**](https://guinlist.wordpress.com/2015/02/09/98-very-much-very-much/).

As well as going with adjectives and adverbs, ***a bit***and ***a lot*** can accompany a verb, e.g. ***works a bit/a lot***. The formal equivalent of ***a bit*** used like this is ***a little***or***a small amount***. Instead of ***a lot*** there are numerous possibilities. One can nearly always say ***very much***or***a great deal***, but particular verbs also allow one or more alternatives (most of which are listed in advanced English coursebooks). For example, with ***works*** one might say ***hard***, with ***hopes*** ***fervently***, with ***depends greatly*** (or ***heavily***), with ***deny strenuously***, and with ***needs*** ***desperately***. With verbs of change, like CHANGE, INCREASE and FALL, there is an especially wide choice – see [**115. Describing Numerical Data**](https://guinlist.wordpress.com/2015/10/05/115-describing-numerical-data/) for details.

There is also a pronoun use of ***a bit***and ***a lot***, e.g. ***earns a bit/a lot***. Here, ***a bit*** is replaceable again by ***a little/a small amount***, but ***a lot***sometimes needs ***very much/a great deal*** and sometimes ***very many***or***a great many***, depending on whether it represents an uncountable noun or a countable one like this:

**(b) Poisonous snakes are abundant, but a great many are very shy.**

***A lot*** can also be used informally with ***of*** before a noun instead of a more precise number (see [**95. Hedging 1: Numbers & Generalizations**](https://guinlist.wordpress.com/2014/12/29/95-hedging-1-numbers-generalizations/)). In formal writing, it can be replaced by ***many***or***various***, but a more impressive Latinate equivalent is***numerous***.

.

**OTHER FORMAL EQUIVALENTS**

The verb GET is another informal word that is especially productive of Latinate alternatives. This is because it has so many different meanings. In the following sentences, a different formal equivalent of GET is needed each time:

**(c) The atmosphere seems to be getting hotter all the time.**

**(d) Visitors can get a pass from the main office.**

**(e) British citizens get a letter from the Monarch when they reach 100.**

**(f) It is easy to get a flight from Jakarta to Australia.**

**(g) The treatment of cancer is getting better all the time.**

In (c), one can use ***becoming***or***growing***, neither of which is Latinate. In (d), the word is ***obtain***, in (e) ***receive***, in (f) ***catch***or***arrange*** and in (g) ***improving***.

Some ***-ly*** adverbs drop this ending in informal spoken usage: for example, one often hears ***go slow***instead of***go slowly***. More on this is in the post [**120. Six Things to Know about Adverbs**](https://guinlist.wordpress.com/2015/12/14/120-six-things-to-know-about-adverbs/).

Care should be taken to choose the right alternative to the informal word ***big***. Speakers of Latin-derived languages – Catalan, French, Italian, Portuguese, Rumanian, Spanish – tend to replace it incorrectly with ***important***or***significant***because similar-looking words in those languages do have the meaning of ***big***. In English, these words say nothing about size but are more to do with role. The main formal synonyms of ***big*** are ***large***, ***great*** and ***major*** (not ***huge***, which means verybig – see [**16. Ways of Distinguishing Similar Words**](https://guinlist.wordpress.com/2011/11/23/ways-of-distinguishing-similar-words/)).

***Large*** seems to be preferred with concrete nouns like ***room, vehicle***or***animal***, and***great*** must be used when there is a suggestion of “imposing”, “special”, “famous” or “wonderful” (e.g.***Alexander The Great, great amenities***). Otherwise, with non-concrete (abstract) nouns, a choice between ***large***and***great*** often seems to depend on the noun being described, in other words to be a matter of “collocation”. Here are some typical abstract partners of ***large***and***great*** (the underlined ones also allow ***major***):

**Abstract Nouns Requiring “large”**

***a factor, a group, a kind, a number, a quantity, a role, a scale, a surplus, a value.***

.

**Abstract Nouns Requiring “great”**

***accuracy, an achievement, charm, a deal, dignity, a discovery, an effect,importance, interest, a loss, meaning, a mistake, a need, relevance, resolve,responsibility, significance, success, a success, understanding, value, a welcome.***

.

**Abstract Nouns Allowing Either**

***an amount, an extent, a part, a range, a rate, a step.***

Two nouns that need to be avoided in formal writing are ***thing*** (countable) and***stuff*** (uncountable). Replacements often depend on context, but common ***thing***words include ***object, item***and***idea***, and ***stuff*** words include ***material, substance***and***matter***.

Lastly, the words ***good***and***bad***, which each possess numerous meanings, are often replaced with more precise Latinate equivalents. Words meaning ***good***include ***appropriate, attractive, beneficial, desirable, effective, enjoyable, pleasant, suitable*** and ***virtuous***, while equivalents of***bad*** include ***damaging, harmful, problematic, troublesome, undesirable, unhealthy, unpleasant***and***unwanted***. More can be found with a thesaurus.