

Reference I

Formal and informal academic words and expressions

There are many differences between formal, neutral and informal vocabulary in English. Here we list a number of words and expressions that are frequent in academic contexts and which may present problems in terms of choosing between formal, neutral and less formal alternatives.

You may often hear some of the informal words and expressions during classes, seminars, etc., but be careful not to use them where they are not appropriate, for example in formal essays or dissertations. Use a good dictionary which gives information about formality if you are in doubt. Where words are informal, we make a special note here. Space is provided at the end for you to add further examples of your own.

(n) = noun (v) = verb (adj) = adjective

<i>formal</i>	<i>neutral (or informal where indicated)</i>	<i>example or comment</i>
accord	agreement	an accord/agreement between two countries
acquire	obtain, get (less formal)	See Unit 48
address (v)	give attention to	address / give attention to a topic / an issue
address, speak to	speak/talk about	See Unit 40
adjudicate	judge	adjudicate/judge a contest/dispute
administer	give	administer/give a drug/medicine to a patient
advantages and disadvantages	pros and cons (informal)	See Unit 38
advocate (v)	support, encourage	We do not advocate/support/ encourage the use of questionnaires with young children.
aim	set out (to do X)	In this paper, we aim/set out to challenge some current assumptions.
albeit	although	See Unit 38
appeal for	ask for	The police are appealing/asking for any information the public can offer.
attempt	try, have a shot at (informal)	See Unit 1
attire	clothes	She always wore rather old-fashioned attire/clothes.
be accepted / be offered a place	get in (informal)	(for entry into a university or college) I hope to get in / be accepted / be offered a place to study engineering.
call on	ask (somebody to do something)	See Unit 40
catalogue (v)	list	See Unit 23
characteristic (adj)	typical	See Unit 4
check	go through	See Unit 6
compose	write	e.g. a poem/letter/symphony
conduct	carry out, do (less formal)	(an experiment / research / a study) See Unit 6
conduct (n)	behaviour	(in the social sense) Such conduct/behaviour is unacceptable.
consist of	be made up of	See Unit 6

<i>formal</i>	<i>neutral (or informal where indicated)</i>	<i>example or comment</i>
constitute	make up	See Unit 6
consult (v)	read, look at	e.g. a document/archive See Unit 23
contest (v)	argue against, disagree with	contest / argue against / disagree with a judgement
convention	agreement	No written convention/agreement existed until 1984.
cordial	friendly	cordial/friendly relations between governments
correct	right	It took hours of calculations to arrive at the correct/right answer.
deliver	give	deliver/give a talk/lecture
demonstrate	show	See Units 3 and 12
describe	set out	See Unit 6
diminish	decrease, grow smaller	The population has diminished/decreased / grown smaller.
discuss	go into	See Unit 6
dispose of	get rid of	dispose of / get rid of nuclear waste
document (v)	record, write about	See Unit 23
dormitory	dorm	BrE = hall of residence See Unit 19
dwelling	house, flat, apartment	There were originally 50 dwellings/houses/flats/apartments on the site.
endure	last	The dynasty endured/lasted for eight centuries.
examination	exam (slightly informal)	(formal test) degree examinations/exams
examine	take, have a look at (informal)	See Unit 12
exceed	be more, higher, greater than	See Unit 7
exchange	swap (informal)	The tube was exchanged/swapped for one of a larger calibre.
final	last	See Unit 50
hierarchy	pecking order	e.g. in an institution
highlight	point up	See Unit 6
improper	wrong	improper/wrong procedure
in excess of	over, higher than	See Unit 7
in greater detail	in more detail	See Unit 40
in respect of, with respect to	with regard to, as far as X is concerned, as far as X goes (informal)	See Unit 16
in sum, in summary	in short, to sum up, summing up	See Units 1, 40 and 50
inappropriate	unsuitable	inappropriate/unsuitable form of words
incorrect	wrong (rather more direct than <i>incorrect</i>)	The totals in column 3 are incorrect/wrong.
incur	result in, experience	See Unit 21
instigate	initiate, start something	See Unit 35
instruct	direct, order	instruct/direct/order somebody to carry out a task

<i>formal</i>	<i>neutral (or informal where indicated)</i>	<i>example or comment</i>
investigate	look into (slightly informal)	investigate / look into a problem
laboratory	lab	See Unit 41
maintain	keep	See Unit 48
make reference to	refer to	See Unit 23
negotiations	talks	negotiations/talks between governments
nevertheless	having said that	See Unit 40
observe	point out	See Unit 6
occasion	time	It happened three times / on three occasions.
occupation	job, profession	(on a questionnaire) Question 3: What is your occupation/profession?
omit, not attend something	skip (informal)	skip a lecture, skip/omit a chapter
pledge	promise	as a noun or as a verb
pose	ask	pose/ask a question See Unit 12
postgraduate	postgrad (informal)	See Unit 18
present	put forward	an idea/view/theory, etc. See Unit 6
primarily	mainly	See Unit 5
recapitulate	recap	See Unit 50
recently	lately	These animals have not been seen recently/lately.
representative	rep (informal)	She's the student representative/rep on the Departmental Committee.
resign	quit (informal)	The President resigned/quit in 1986.
resolve	solve, end	resolve/solve a problem, resolve/end a conflict
rest on	be based on	See Unit 14
return	come back, go back, get back	See Unit 40
revise	look back over, go over	See Unit 6
sanction (v)	permit	The government cannot sanction law breaking.
secure (v)	obtain, get (informal)	e.g. secure oil supplies See Unit 47
sole(ly)	only	See Unit 1
somewhat	slightly, a little, a bit (informal)	See Unit 5
speak of	talk of, talk about (less formal)	See Unit 14
spouse	husband, wife	The President's spouse/husband/wife attended the ceremony.
substantial	large, big	a substantial number/amount See Unit 7
treat	deal with	This issue was not treated / dealt with fully in Holstedt's earlier work.
undergraduate	undergrad (informal)	The undergrads/undergraduates mostly live in halls of residence.

<i>formal</i>	<i>neutral (or informal where indicated)</i>	<i>example or comment</i>
undertaking (n)	promise	an official undertaking/promise to do something
utilise	use something effectively	utilise a resource/method
virtually	almost, more or less	See Unit 1
write of	write about	See Unit 14
X is not possible / not correct	There's no way X ... (rather informal)	See Unit 1
Yours faithfully	Yours sincerely, best wishes (less formal), best (informal)	way of ending a letter or email