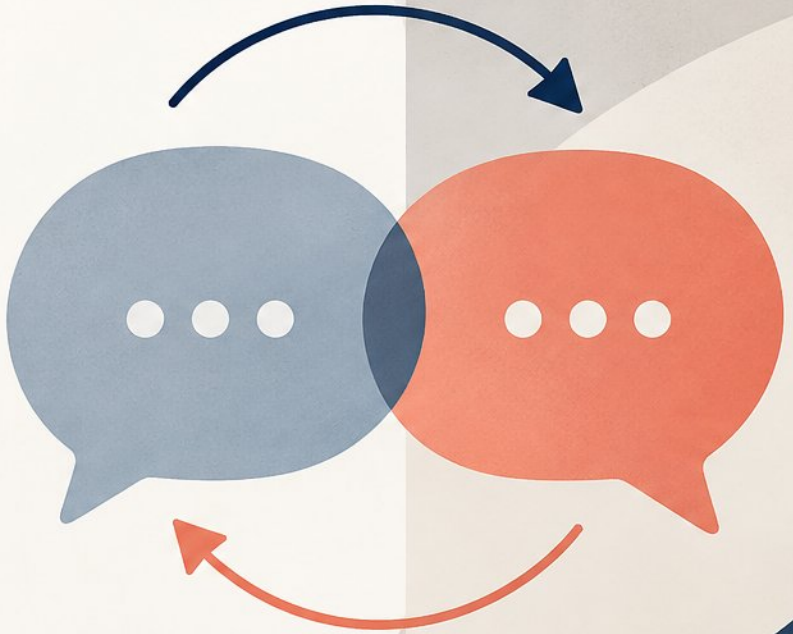
Formal or Informal?

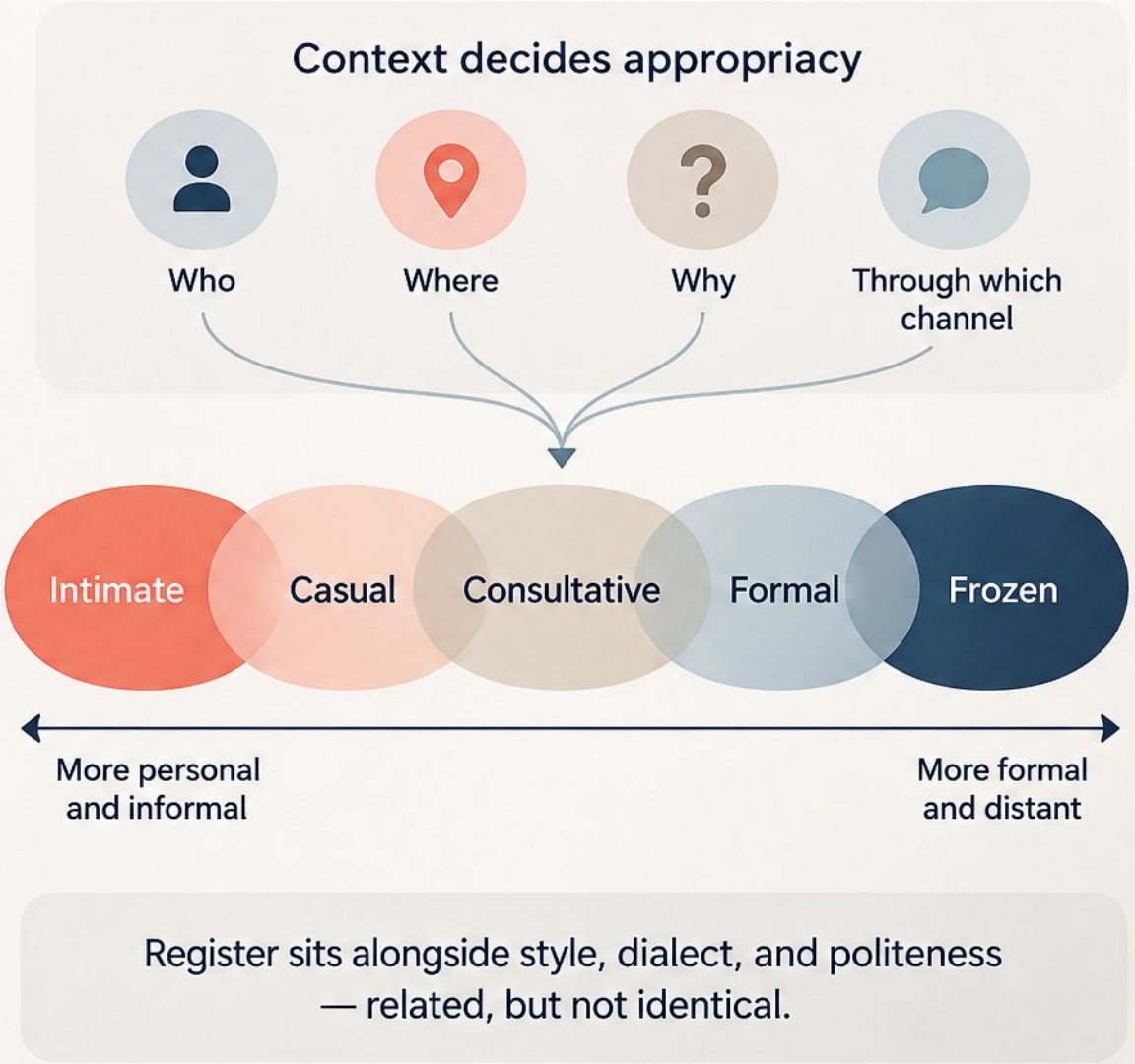
Choosing the Right Register in English

- Move between casual and professional English with control
- B1–C1 learners often sound too stiff or too casual
- Register = tone + grammar + vocabulary + politeness
- Quick diagnostic: rate three messages, "too stiff" to "too casual"
- Roadmap: recognize, choose, adjust, practice register



What Register Really Means

- Register is how language shifts with situation, audience, and purpose
- It overlaps with style, dialect, and politeness — but they are not identical
- The continuum: intimate, casual, consultative, formal, frozen — overlapping, not fixed boxes
- Context decides appropriacy: who, where, why, and through which channel
- Grammatically correct English can still land in the wrong register
- Word and grammar swaps shift register: 'find out' → 'enquire'; 'can't' → 'am unable'



Register sits alongside style, dialect, and politeness — related, but not identical.

Signals of Formality and Informality

- **Vocabulary:** contractions, phrasal verbs vs. Latinate words
- **Grammar:** ellipsis, passive voice, modal choice, sentence length
- **Pragmatic:** directness, politeness, openings and closings
- **Punctuation:** emoji, exclamation marks, capitalization in digital writing
- **Warning:** clusters of features decide register, not single signals

Diagnosing Your Default Register

- Why learners have a default: classroom habits, L1 transfer, media exposure
- Self-audit: collect three recent real messages and label audience and purpose
- Too stiff in casual settings due to textbook phrases and formal grammar
- Too casual in professional settings because of chat habits and Netspeak
- Profile yourself: one register strength and one adjustment target

Three Recent Messages

Could you send me the notes from today's class?	**Audience:** Classmate **Purpose:** Request information
Thanks so much for your help! You're the best.	**Audience:** Friend **Purpose:** Express appreciation
I look forward to your response regarding the proposal.	**Audience:** Colleague **Purpose:** Follow up

Too stiff in casual settings
due to textbook phrases and formal grammar

I would be most grateful if you could join us later.

Too casual in professional settings
because of chat habits and Netspeak

sure no problem lmk anytime!

Profile yourself: one register strength and one adjustment target

Choosing Register in Real Situations

Decision **check:** audience, relationship, purpose, channel, stakes



Workplace

- Same request, three registers: chat, email, presentation
- Workplace: asking a manager, messaging a teammate, emailing a client

Social

- Social: joining lunch chat, declining an invite, making small talk

Repair moves: adjust quickly if you chose the wrong register

Upgrading and Downgrading Your English

- Make informal messages more formal without sounding unnatural
- Make formal messages warmer without losing respect
- Key transformations: contractions, phrasal verbs, modal verbs, sentence length
- Softeners and boosters: ‘just’, ‘could you’, ‘I was wondering’, ‘ASAP’, ‘FYI’
- Practice: rewrite one sentence for a friend, a colleague, and a senior leader



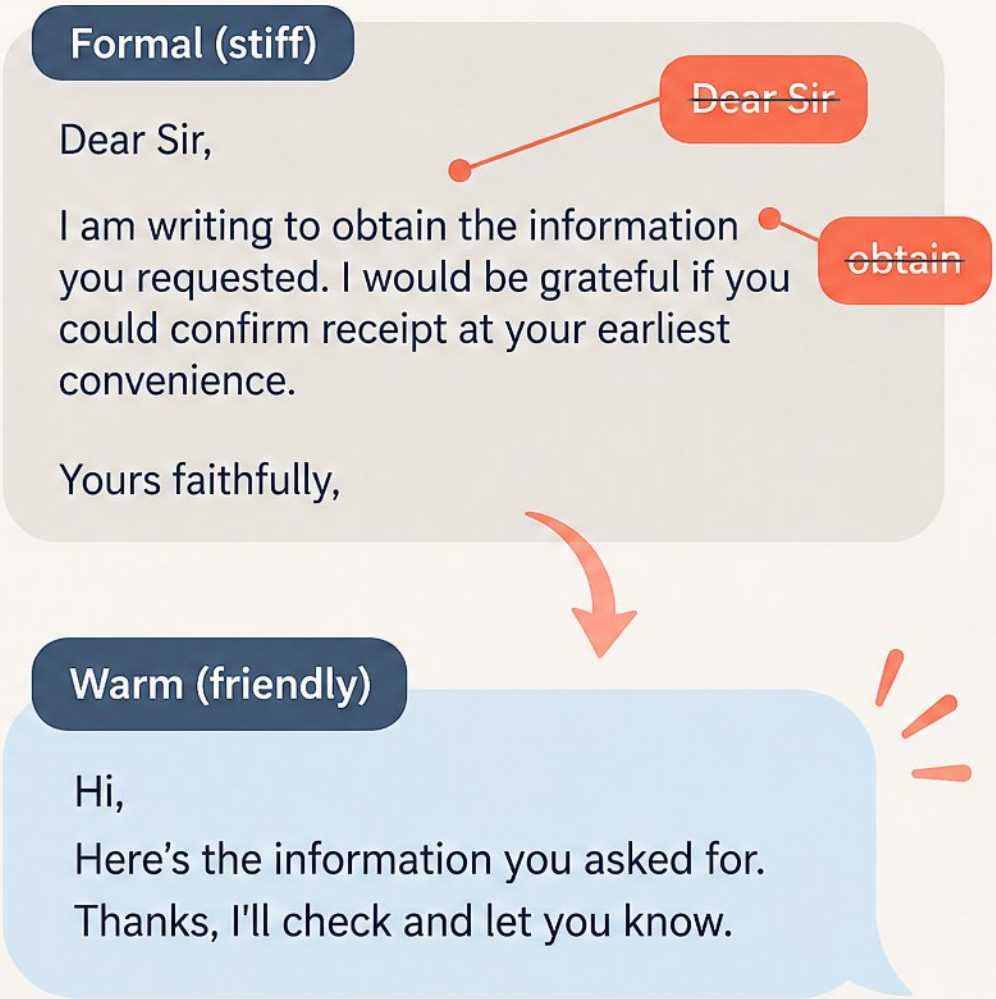
Cultural and Digital Register Shifts

- Register expectations differ across cultures and international workplaces
- Directness varies: efficient to one reader, rude to another
- Each platform has its own norms: email, Slack, Teams, LinkedIn, WhatsApp
- Emoji, punctuation, and response speed all signal register
- Match the platform and group norm before your personal style



Improving a Stiff Message

- Cut archaic phrases like 'Dear Sir' in friendly messages
- Swap Latin-based words for natural phrasal verbs: obtain → get
- Simplify long sentences without losing clarity
- Use contractions and direct address: 'Thanks, I'll check'
- Worked example: formal letter becomes a warm chat message



Fixing an Overly Casual Message

- Traps: slang, abbreviations, emoji overload, bare commands
- Swap chat phrases for neutral equivalents
- Add hedging: "I was wondering if you could..."
- Choose greeting and sign-off for channel and recipient
- Worked example: Slack message to professional email

hey! can u take a look at this asap? lmk if it’s ok 😊 thx!



Hello,

I was wondering if you could take a look at this when you have a moment. Please let me know if it looks good.

Best regards,

Email, Chat, and Video: Channel Matters



Email

A record

Greeting	Formal and polite
Length	More detail is fine
Sign-off	Thanks or Best



Chat

A conversation

Greeting	Friendly and direct
Length	Keep it short
Sign-off	Cheers



Video

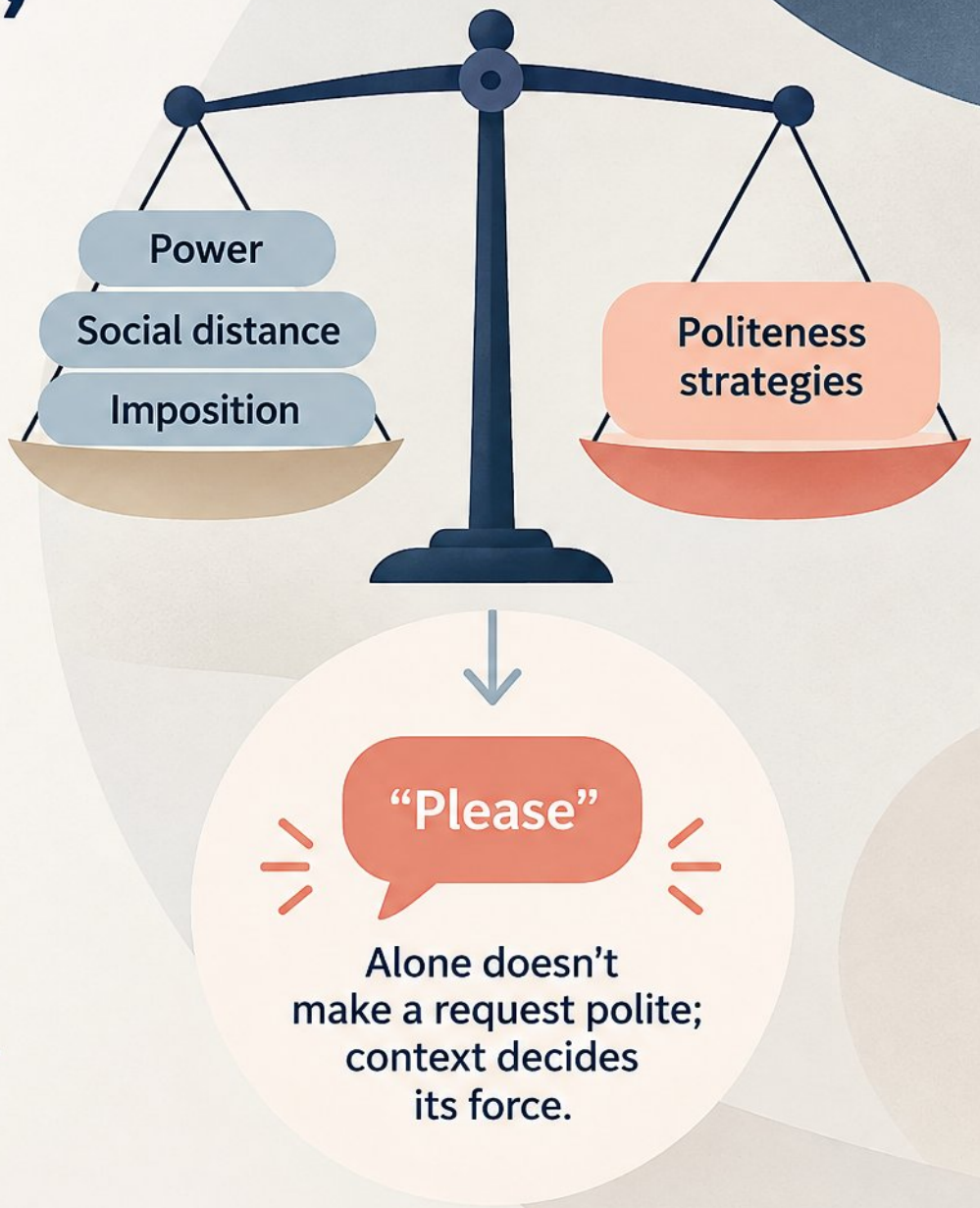
Blends both

Greeting	Friendly and professional
Length	Be concise
Sign-off	Thanks or Best

- Email is a record; chat is a conversation; video blends both.
- In email, the first three lines set the tone — lead with the ask.
- In chat, put the request in your first message, not after "Hi!".
- Emoji: normal in chat, careful in email, skip in bad news.
- Sign-offs: Thanks for requests, Best as the safe default, Cheers in chat.
- Match greeting, length, and sign-off to the channel.

Politeness, Power, and Directness

- Positive politeness builds closeness; negative politeness respects distance
- Power, social distance, and imposition drive register choice
- 'Please' alone doesn't make a request polite; context decides its force
- Softeners: 'I was wondering if you could...', 'Would you mind...'
- Directness can be efficient or rude — relationship decides



Practice Lab: Rewrite, Role-Play, Reflect

- Rewrite five short messages: shift register up or down
- Role-play pairs: one too stiff, one too casual — then repair
- Choose-the-register quiz with workplace and social scenarios
- Peer feedback with a simple register rubric
- Action plan: three phrases to upgrade, three to downgrade



Common Register Mistakes and How to Repair Them

- Mixed register: "Dear Sir" opening followed by slang like gonna
- Over-formal phrases sound archaic or cold: "I dwell in Leipzig"
- Over-casual messages undermine professionalism in high-stakes settings
- Repair moves: rephrase, reframe, apologise briefly, adjust next time
- Build a personal repair toolkit for real-time adjustment



Your Register Toolkit and Next Steps

- Register is a choice, not a fixed level of correctness.
- Toolkit: audience–purpose–channel check; spot signals; upgrade or downgrade phrases.
- Keep practising: collect real examples, compare channels, ask trusted feedback.
- Avoid the two extremes: permanently stiff or permanently casual.
- Reflection: what will you adjust in your next English message?



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