Unit 1: Introduction

Formal and Informal Communication

A recent study conducted by the Project Management Institute (PMI) revealed that ineffective communication has a significant negative impact on successful project execution. They found that “Ineffective communications is the primary contributor to project failure one third of the time, and had a negative impact on project success more than half the time.” Many recommendations were included in a report based on this research; they included the following recommended strategies project managers/owners should consider to improve their project communications programs:

1. Close the communications gap around business benefits.
2. Tailor communications to different stakeholder groups.
3. Acknowledge the value of project management, including project management communications.
4. Use standardised project communications practices, and use them effectively.

This course will address many of these topics, and others which influence project success. An initial critical element is recognising some of the aspects which create the requirement for formality or informality, and the form this may take. This document outlines a series of tips to enable the reader to identify formal levels of communication.

The Differences between Formal and Informal Language

The following points are covered which effect formality:

1. The use of short phrases and contractions for less-formal writing, and the relationship between length and formality.
2. The choice of vocabulary.

3. The factors affecting levels of formality, and the consequences of 'hitting the wrong note'.

1 Short phrases and contractions

The language we use in informal writing is much closer to spoken English than the language used in formal letters. For example, when we speak we often use contractions, as follows:

'I'll send you the report next week.'
'We'd like to implement a new proposal.'

In the same way, contractions are often used in informal professional letters.

'It's a pity we couldn't meet.'
'I'm enclosing details of the schedule of activities.'

A very simple rule, which is usually (but not always) true, is that longer phrases are more formal than shorter phrases.

For example:
'I would be grateful if you could submit your report by Friday.'

is more formal than:

'Please could you submit your report by Friday?'

And that is more formal than:

'Please submit your report by Friday.'
As a general rule, we should avoid any extremes of formality. Aim for a style that is similar to your natural style, or is that expected for the professional circumstances. However, consider your readers' expectations, too, and adjust the style accordingly. Least formal styles are typically considered to be imperative sentences (begin with a verb and no subject).

2 The Language of Informal Communication: Vocabulary

Some words are considered more formal than others. For example, 'I regret' is more formal than 'I am sorry', 'advise' is more formal than 'tell', 'increase' is more formal than 'go up', and 'receive' is more formal than 'get'.

There are historical and cultural reasons for this. English has been influenced by many other languages, most notably French, which was for centuries the language of the educated and wealthiest classes. French still enjoys a somewhat high status in diplomacy or linguistics. So, while we have (at least) two words for everything, in daily speech we tend to use the older, more Germanic forms, reserving the words of French/Latin origin for when we want to be more formal. This higher level of formality tends to be more often used in written forms.

Typically, a few rules to go by may include:

- phrasal verbs (drop off) are less formal than regular verbs (deliver)
- adjectives are less formal than adverbs
- active may be less formal than passive

3 Which factors affect our choice of language?

There are three factors affecting our choice of language:

1. The message itself
2. The medium (and physical circumstances)
3. The sender-receiver relationship

The Message

How we say something depends a lot on what we are talking about. For example, if you wanted to borrow 5 Euro to pay for a taxi from a friend, you would probably be very direct - after all, you're not asking for much. However, if the sum were €1000 you would probably be less direct and more formal.

The Medium

How formal we are also depends on how we communicate. E-mails and memos are less formal than reports, and conversations usually less formal than presentations. However, written communication does not have to be more formal than our spoken communication. The most important factor is the sender-receiver relationship.

The Sender-Receiver Relationship

What is most important in how we express our ideas is our relationship with the message-receiver or, in this case, the reader. If we know somebody well we tend to be more direct and less formal, but when writing to a stranger we might be a little more formal - but not as formal as you might think.

The danger of using formal language is that we can often alienate people by being more formal than is required. Our ideas, too, can get lost when they are surrounded by unnecessary words.

It is important to remember that our written style should not starkly differ from the way we speak. As a rule, if you wouldn't say it, don't write it. This does not mean being careless with our writing or using slang: write to a CEO as you would talk to a CEO; write to a colleague as you would talk to a colleague.