

Malcolm Mann
4th April 2018

**Exam writing tasks:
dealing with
formality, register
and style**



Getting the register and level of formality right in an article, essay, letter or email, for example, can be very challenging for students.

In this session, we'll explore what 'register', 'formality' and 'style' really mean in the context of exams.

We'll list some of the key questions students should ask themselves before/as they write, and focus on some key dos and don'ts to ensure exam success in this area.

Dear Mr Mann,

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I would be grateful if you could send me a pdf of the presentation slides. I am certain that my fellow teachers and students will benefit from them.

Thank you again, and I look forward to attending another of your presentations in the near future.

Yours sincerely,

Hi Malc,

It was great to see you online yesterday.
Thanks a lot for your presentation! I found it
really useful and thought-provoking!

Can you send me a pdf of the presentation
slides? If it's ok with you, I'll share it with my
colleagues and students too.

Thanks again! I can't wait till your next
webinar!

Bye for now,

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All the best,

Dear Mr Mann,

Thanks so much for your super cool webinar, entitled 'Exam writing tasks: dealing with formality, register and style', which I attended yesterday.

I would be grateful if you could send me a pdf of the presentation slides. They're gonna be really useful!

Thanks again, and I look forward to attending another of your presentations sooner rather than later.

Bye for now!

Yours sincerely,

What is register?

What is register?

The type of language you use in a particular situation or when communicating with a particular person or people:

- Style
- Tone (conversational, academic, etc)
- Formality
- Politeness
- Deference

What is register?

A number of main text-type categories:

CONVERSATION

NON-CONVERSATIONAL SPEECH

FICTION

NEWS

ACADEMIC WRITING

NON-FICTION PROSE

CORRESPONDENCE

ADVERTISING

PUBLIC NOTICES

Why is register so difficult for students?

Why is register so difficult for students?

Register isn't always easy even in your first language.

Why is register so difficult for students?

Register and formality have so many different aspects and dimensions to them.

Style is a nebulous concept to teach.

Style/register depends on factors such as determining your relationship with the target reader.

Why is register so difficult for students?

For each main text-type category, there can be a huge number of different registers, e.g.

NON-CONVERSATIONAL SPEECH

A sermon

A lecture

A teacher talking to students

A radio interview

A business discussion

A political speech

Etc etc etc

Why is register so difficult for students?

Register/formality change over time.

How has email, text messaging and social media affected the formality of written texts?

Why is register so difficult for students?

Not everyone agrees on what register is appropriate for a particular situation.

Why is register so difficult for students?

Languages differ in terms of how they deal with register/formality, and even in terms of how important register/formality is in written texts.

For the English language:

- politeness/deference extremely important (class structure)
- English doesn't have plural 'you' for politeness

Why is register so difficult for students?

We don't always put enough emphasis on register and formality when teaching and presenting vocabulary.

e.g.

put up with = tolerate

in a nutshell = basically, essentially

How important is register in exams?

How important is register in exams?

For the *First* (B2) and *Proficiency* (C2) Writing paper, 25% of marks for each composition are explicitly given to register.

How important is register in exams?

Content

Communicative achievement

Organisation

Language

How important is register in exams?

Content focuses on how well the candidate has fulfilled the task, in other words if they have done what they were asked to do.

Communicative achievement

Organisation

Language

How important is register in exams?

Content

Communicative achievement focuses on how **appropriate** the writing is for the task and whether the candidate has used **the appropriate register**.

Organisation

Language

How important is register in exams?

Content

Communicative achievement

Organisation focuses on the way the candidate puts together the piece of writing, in other words if it is logical and ordered.

Language

How important is register in exams?

Content

Communicative achievement

Organisation

Language focuses on vocabulary and grammar. This includes the range of language as well as how accurate it is.

How important is register in exams?

“Candidates are required to write a discursive essay in grammatically correct English, using a neutral or formal register.”

“...candidates should consider carefully what level of formality is appropriate to the task.”

“Your students need to think carefully about who the target reader is for each task and try to write in an appropriate style and tone.”

How can we best prepare our students?

How can we best prepare our students?

- **Analysis of models**
(in coursebook, their own writing, in exam handbooks, from real life)
- **Comparative analysis** of different registers and styles
- Key **questions** when facing a writing task
- Key **specific dos and don'ts** re register (grammar, vocabulary, punctuation, information)

How can we best prepare our students?

We have to start work on formality and register early (B1 or even before).

We have to see this as an ongoing process, focusing on register/formality when teaching grammar and vocabulary, and reading and listening, as well as when preparing for writing tasks.

Analysis: what makes this very (too?) formal?

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Vocabulary
Grammar
Punctuation
Information

analysis: what makes this very (too?) formal?

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Yours sincerely,

Vocabulary/set phrases
in red

Grammar
certain that

Punctuation
no exclamation marks
no contractions

Information
name of reader
name of presentation
place of presentation

Analysis: what makes this semi-formal?

Dear Malcolm,
Many thanks for your webinar yesterday. It was extremely useful and thought-provoking. Could you send me a pdf of the presentation slides? I'm sure my fellow teachers and students will really benefit from them. Thank you again. I'm looking forward to your next presentation.
All the best,

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All the best,

Vocabulary / set phrases
in red

Grammar
sure that X

Punctuation
no exclamation marks
some contractions

Information
name of reader
X name of presentation
X place of presentation

Analysis: what makes this informal?

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Bye for now,

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Vocabulary / set phrases
in red

Grammar
If it's..., I'll...

Punctuation
exclamation marks
contractions

Information
Use of 'I'
name of reader
X name of presentation
X place of presentation

Task-based analysis

Rewrite as semi-formal

Rewrite as formal

Multiple-choice:

- a) I can't wait till
- b) I am looking forward to

Scoring

What mark out of 5 would you give this for register?

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Comparative analysis: style

The writer...	...uses a lively, chatty, almost conversational style.	...tries to interest and entertain the reader.	...directly addresses the reader.	...discusses a subject in a logical and formal way.
Unit 1 Informal letter				
Unit 2 Short story				
Unit 3 Discursive composition / essay				
Unit 4 Review				
Unit 5 Formal letter				
Unit 6 Article				

Comparative analysis: detail

The writer uses...	the impersonal passive (e.g. <i>It is said that...</i>)	contractions	a rhetorical question	discursive phrases	formal vocabulary	informal punctuation
Unit 1 Informal letter						
Unit 2 Short story						
Unit 3 Discursive composition / essay						
Unit 4 Review						
Unit 5 Formal letter						
Unit 6 Article						

Key questions for a Writing task

What should a candidate ask themselves about register before/as they write?

Key questions for a Writing task

Who is the target reader?

Who is the assumed writer?

What's the relationship between them?

Should I address the target reader directly?

What style is required?

What level of formality is required?

What set phrases are/aren't appropriate?

What kind of vocabulary is/isn't appropriate?

What grammatical structures are/aren't appropriate?

What punctuation is/isn't appropriate?

Example Proficiency writing task

2 A literary magazine is running a series of reviews of books that people enjoyed reading as a child and would recommend for children today. You decide to send in a review in which you describe a book you enjoyed and the attractions it had for you as a child. You should also explain why it remains relevant for children today.

Write your **review**.

Example Proficiency writing task

2 A literary magazine is running a series of reviews of books that people enjoyed reading as a child and would recommend for children today. You decide to send in a review in which you describe a book you enjoyed and the attractions it had for you as a child. You should also explain why it remains relevant for children today.

Who is the target reader?

A child? A teenager? An adult? What do we know about them?

Who is the assumed writer?

A child? A teenager? An adult? What do we know about them?

What's the relationship between them?

Should I (i.e. the writer) address the target reader directly?

What style is required? Academic? Lively? Something else?

What level of formality is required?

Key dos and don'ts

- Contractions
- Relative pronouns
- Personal pronouns
- The passive
- Phrasal verbs
- Idioms
- Collocations
- *will* and *be going to*
- Rhetorical questions
- Inversions
- Discursive phrases
- Impersonal *It*
- *get*
- Hypotheticals
- Lexical bundles
- Punctuation
- Consistency

Key dos and don'ts: contractions

An easy way to make your writing more formal is to avoid contractions (= short forms).

An easy way to make your writing more informal is to use contractions.

I'll share it with my colleagues.

I will share it with my colleagues.

I'm looking forward to hearing from you.

I am looking forward to hearing from you.

Key dos and don'ts: relative pronouns

An easy way to make your writing more formal is to use *which*, etc.

An easy way to make your writing more informal is to use *that*, or no relative pronoun.

This is a problem which many people face.
This is a problem that a lot of people face.
This is a problem lots of people have.

Key dos and don'ts: hypotheticals

The more hypothetical a statement,
the more formal/polite it is.

This is because hypothetical statements create
distance. Distance = politeness:

Send me the slides.

Can you send me the slides?

Could/would you send me the slides?

I'd be grateful if you could/would send me the slides.

I wonder if you could/would send me the slides.

Key dos and don'ts: hypotheticals

The more hypothetical a statement,
the more formal/polite it is.

This is because hypothetical statements create
distance. Distance = politeness:

Direct = informal: *I believe that...*

Hypothetical = formal: *I would argue that...*

Key dos and don'ts: *will* and *be going to*

Use *will* to make your writing more formal.

Use *be going to* or *'ll* to make your writing more informal.

Essay:

It is unclear whether this will prove to be successful in the long term.

Informal letter:

I'm not sure if I'm going to pass or not!

I'm not sure if I'll pass or not!

Key dos and don'ts: personal pronouns

In academic writing, try to avoid the use of 'I'.

~~*I think...*~~

~~*I am going to discuss...*~~

However, 'I', 'me' and 'my' are acceptable in set discursive phrases:

As far as I am concerned...

It seems to me that...

I would argue that...

To my mind,

I personally/strongly believe that...

Key dos and don'ts: the passive

The passive voice is much more common in academic writing than in other registers.

If you're writing an essay, try to include at least two examples of a passive construction.

Try to include one example of the impersonal passive, e.g. *It has been said that...*

Key dos and don'ts: impersonal *it*

In an essay, try to include at least one example of impersonal *it* (whether followed by the passive or not).

It is well-known that...

It has been said that...

It may seem that...

It is uncertain whether...

Key dos and don'ts: rhetorical questions

These can and should be used in articles and essays but be careful.

In an article (or review, if appropriate), you can address the reader directly:

Have you ever considered using your mobile phone to make a short film?

In an essay, you should not address the reader directly:

What is the main cause of this pollution?

Key dos and don'ts: inversions

Try to include one inversion in an essay.

Not only is this unworkable from a practical perspective, but it is also unethical.

There is no evidence that this is workable from a practical perspective. Nor is it an ethical solution to the problem.

Key dos and don'ts: discursive phrases

It's vital that you know a wide range of discursive phrases (such as *in my opinion*, *on the other hand*, etc), and their functions.

It's equally vital that you know what text-types and registers it's (in)appropriate to use them in.

Which of these are probably (in)appropriate for an article for a young people's magazine?

In my view

What's more

In conclusion

Furthermore

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<i>In my view</i>	✓
<i>What's more</i>	✓
<i>In conclusion</i>	X
<i>Furthermore</i>	X

Key dos and don'ts: *punctuation*

Use exclamation marks in informal writing such as informal letters. Without them, the tone can sound serious and dry.

Don't use exclamation marks in formal writing such as essays and reports.

In semi-formal articles and reviews, use them sparingly and only when really appropriate. (No more than 2 per piece of writing?)

Key dos and don'ts: *consistency*

The essential thing with register is to be consistent throughout your piece of writing.

Decide on your register and level of formality before you start writing, and constantly check that you're sticking to it. Don't switch registers mid-text.

There is one major exception to this. What is it?

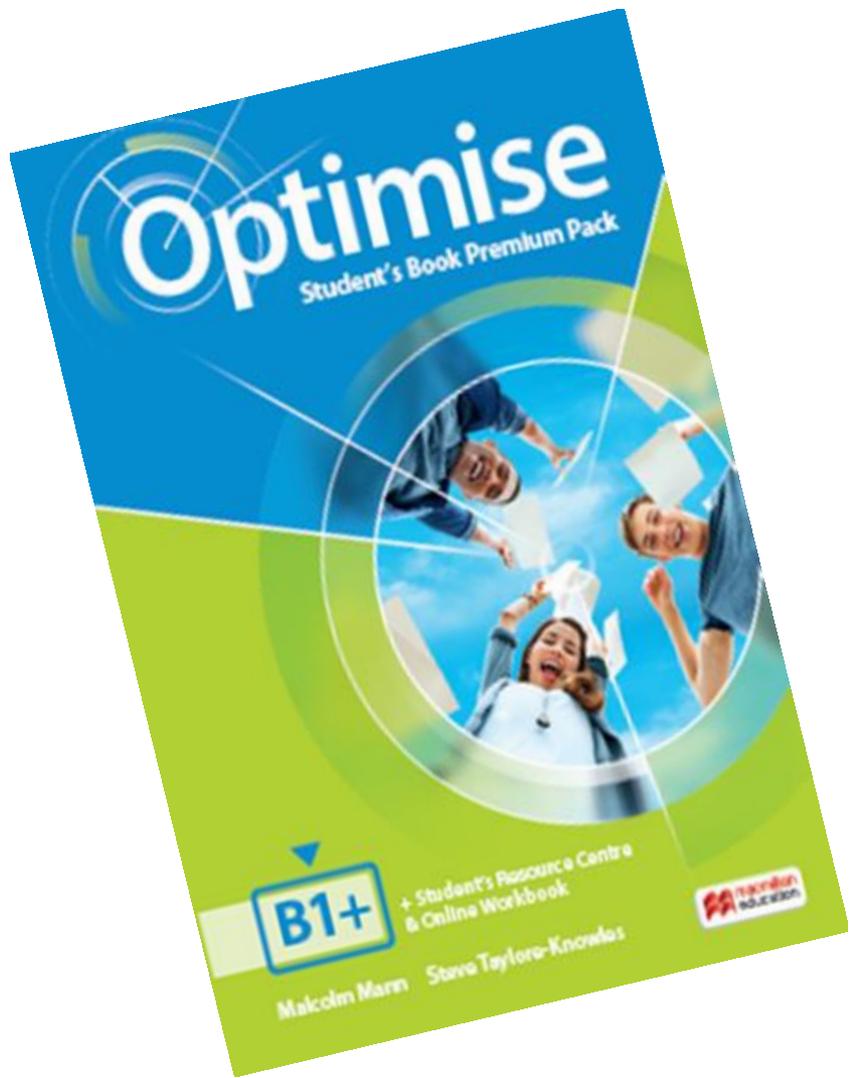
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Answer: the register of direct speech in a story may be very different (more informal, more colloquial, etc) to the register of the narrator.



1 In pairs or as a group, answer the questions.

- Do you ever write emails? If so, who do you write them to?
- Have you ever written a letter? If so, who was it to?

2 Read this letter and choose the best words or phrases to complete the report below.

Dear Mr Langton,

I am writing with regard to your request for suggestions about local people with particularly interesting skills or abilities who you could invite to give a lecture at school. I believe I know the perfect person.

Lucas Martin, who lives in the town, is a professional magician. He performs regularly at parties and events and is an extremely interesting and friendly person. I know him well because we used to live next door to him. He would often show me tricks, and he even taught me a few.

I have little doubt that if you invited him, he would be happy to give a lecture. He would probably perform some tricks, and tell some fascinating stories about how he became a magician and the people he has met in his career.

Please let me know if you would like me to give you his contact details, or if you would prefer me to contact him first myself.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,
Deborah Clarkson
Year 11

This is a letter from a (1) **teacher / student** to a teacher or school principal. Because of their teacher-student relationship, and perhaps because the writer knows that the teacher (2) **doesn't care about / expects and values** good-quality writing, the writer has used (3) a **formal / an informal** tone. In other words, it sounds more (4) **polite / friendly** and (5) **lighthearted / serious** than a letter or email to a friend or close relative. For example, the writer says, 'I am writing with regard to' rather than, 'I'm writing about'. The writer (6) **has / hasn't** carefully and successfully separated the letter into paragraphs, and uses some (7) **appropriate / inappropriate** letter expressions, such as *Yours sincerely*, for a person whose name they (8) **don't know / know** but is not a close friend or relative.

EXAM SKILL

Using formal and informal language

- Always think about what your relationship is with the person you're writing to, so you know if your style should be formal or informal.
- Informal texts are chatty, friendly and conversational, for friends, close family members or young people.
- Formal texts are serious or respectful rather than friendly, for (older) people in authority and people you don't know well.

3 Read this email and write examples for each category below.

To: Sam
Subject: part-time job

Hi Sam,

Thanks for your email yesterday. It was great to hear from you! That tablet you got for your birthday sounds really cool. I hope I get one for my birthday next month!

You said you're thinking of looking for a part-time job. I think that's a great idea! I love my job working in a café every Sunday. I know you don't want to work as a waiter so the question is – what should you do?

If I were you, I'd do something connected to something you enjoy. You love sport, so maybe you could look for a job in a sports shop or a sports centre. You also like music and acting, don't you? Perhaps you could find something in a local theatre or concert venue. And don't wait for them to advertise. Write to them or send them an email asking if they're looking for anyone and saying you're available and interested. Lots of people get jobs that way!

Anyway, let me know how it goes. Good luck!

Bye for now!
Dave

Find two or three examples of informal ...

- letter/email expressions. _____
- vocabulary. _____
- grammar/punctuation. _____

OPTIMISE YOUR EXAM

A letter / An email

- Formal letters/emails: avoid exclamation marks and contractions (*he'd, can't, etc.*), and use formal phrases, such as *I look forward to hearing from you.*
- Informal letters/emails: you can use exclamation marks, contractions and informal vocabulary and phrases, such as *cool* and *Bye for now!*

4 Look at these writing tasks. Tick the statements that are true for each one.

Task A

You have received this letter from your school principal, Mrs Holt. Read this part of the letter and then write your letter to Mrs Holt.

The school is planning to organise a series of lectures by local people who can teach students new skills. Do you know anyone appropriate locally who we could invite? Please give me a little information about how you know them and what makes them interesting.

Write your letter.

Task B

You have received this email from your English-speaking friend, Alex.

From: Alex
Subject: I need your advice
I'm thinking of taking a part-time job, working in a sports shop on Saturdays. It'll be good experience for me, and I'll earn some extra money, but it will mean giving up karate lessons. Do you think it's a good idea?
What should I do?
Alex

Write your email.

	Task A	Task B
1 Your letter/email will be informal.		
2 You know the name of the person you are writing to.		
3 You only have to write one paragraph.		
4 You should recommend a person, explaining why.		
5 You should give advice, expressing your opinion.		
6 You will need to use your imagination to come up with ideas.		

5 Plan Make a paragraph plan for each writing task in Exercise 4.

6 Write Write your letter and your email in an appropriate style. Write 140–190 words each time.

7 Check Before you hand in your letter and email, complete this checklist.

Task A	Task B	Checklist
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	I've used the right level of formality.
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	I've followed the notes in my paragraph plan.
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	I've included all the information I need to include.
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	I've started and ended my letter/email the right way.
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	I've checked my grammar and spelling.

AN INFORMAL LETTER/EMAIL | Example task

You have received a letter from your English-speaking penfriend.

I need your help! My teacher has asked me to write about a public holiday in another country. Can you tell me about a public holiday you like? What traditions do you have connected to that day? What happens? Why do you like it?
Thanks for your help, and write soon!
Oliver

Write your letter.

Use an informal greeting with your friend's first name.

Hi Oliver!

It was great to hear from you. I'm so happy you had a good birthday. And I'm glad you got my card!

You asked about a public holiday. I'd say that Independence Day is my favourite public holiday. It takes place on 12th July each year and we celebrate the day my country became independent. That was 200 years ago, and Independence Day has been celebrated every year since then.

On Independence Day, it's traditional to go to the mountains with your family and have a picnic. We eat a special cake, called a Victory Pie, which is baked with a coin inside. The person who gets the coin is supposed to be lucky for a year! After that we play games such as football.

I guess I like this holiday in particular because it's a time when the whole family gets together. Everyone is off work and off school and the weather is usually good because it's the summer. I love being with my family in the mountains, enjoying the sun and playing games.

Anyway, I hope that helps!

Write soon!

Lots of love,

Alex

Don't start giving information immediately. Be polite and refer to something that has happened to your friend. Use your imagination.

Use informal language, including contractions and exclamation marks where appropriate.

Add any further points you've been asked for. Check the question carefully to make sure you don't miss anything.

Give your personal response if the question asks for it.

Use informal closing expressions.

Present any information you have been asked for.

Use a variety of tenses and sentence structures.

End the letter/email with your first name.

USEFUL PHRASES

Starting the letter/email	Referring to someone's news	Introducing points	Ending the letter/email
Hi Oliver!, Dear Oliver, asking about health: How are you? I hope you're well. How are things?	I'm so glad to hear you passed your test / had a good birthday / got a new pet / had a good party / etc., I was very happy to read that ..., Great news about your ...	You asked about ..., I'd say that ..., First of all, Firstly, Secondly, Also, Oh, and another thing!, By the way, Guess what!	I have to go now. Got to go. Take care! Write soon! Love, Lots of love, All my love, Best wishes, All the best, Yours,

A FORMAL LETTER/EMAIL | Example task

You have received this email from your school principal, Mrs Carter. Read this part of the email and then write your email to Mrs Carter.

From: Sue Carter
Subject: Suggestions for end-of-year event

As you know, we usually hold an end-of-year event for school leavers on the final Friday afternoon and evening of term. Each year, I ask students for their suggestions regarding what to do. Please email me before next Friday with any suggestions you have. Explain why I should choose your idea!

Write your email.

Use a formal greeting.

From: Izzy Hopkins Year 12
To: Mrs Carter

Dear Mrs Carter,

I'm writing in response to your email asking for suggestions for this year's end-of-year event for school leavers. I believe I have a great idea which everyone will enjoy.

Last year, you held a formal ball in the Sports Hall. As I understand it, everyone enjoyed it but people found buying or hiring their clothes very expensive.

I would like to suggest that this year we hold a dancing competition to raise money for a local charity. It would last from 2pm until 9pm, and people could be sponsored for each hour they keep dancing. Several of the students in Year 11 are good DJs, so they could bring their devices and provide the music. It could be a lot of fun, and raise money too. I have discussed this with all my friends in Year 12 and they fully support the idea.

Please let me know if you have any questions, or would like to discuss this further.

I'm looking forward to hearing what you decide.

Yours,
Izzy Hopkins
Year 12

End the letter/email with your first and last name. Add any other relevant information, such as what year you're in at school, if it's appropriate.

It is acceptable to use some contractions (e.g. I'm, I'll, etc.), particularly if you know the person you're writing to. However, your vocabulary, grammar and spelling should be more formal than in an informal letter.

Indirect questions sound more formal and polite than direct questions.

We often have two formal closing expressions. I'm looking forward to is slightly less formal and serious than I look forward to. It's fine to use with your school principal.

Give your reason for writing in the first paragraph.

Make sure you fully answer the question.

As appropriate, ask if they need further information, etc. in the final paragraph. It is acceptable for the paragraph to be very short – even just one sentence.

USEFUL PHRASES

Starting the letter/email	Explaining why you're writing	Making suggestions	Inviting	Asking if they need anything	Ending the letter/email line 1	Ending the letter/email line 2
Dear + Mr/ Mrs/Miss/Dr + surname, followed by a comma	I am writing with regard to ..., I am writing regarding ..., I'm writing in order to ..., I am writing in response to...	I would like to suggest (that) ..., You may/might wish to consider ..., One option would be ..., Could I suggest ...?	I would like to invite you to ..., We would be very grateful if you'd consider attending ..., I wonder if you would be able to attend ...	Please let me know if you ..., If you ..., please let me know immediately.	I look forward to hearing from you., I'm looking forward to hearing from you soon., I am looking forward to hearing what you decide.	Yours, Yours sincerely, Regards, Warmest regards, Best regards,

References

The Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners

The Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English

Cambridge ESOL First for Schools Handbook

Cambridge ESOL Proficiency Handbook