

Email Vocabulary – Lesson 2: Register, Formality Shifts and Email Strategy

Level: C1 | Business English | Student Worksheet

Vocabulary

nominalisation (noun)	Converting a verb or adjective into a noun to add formality and remove agency.	<i>"The cancellation of the contract" instead of "cancelling the contract" is nominalisation.</i>
foregrounding (noun)	Placing the most strategically significant element at the beginning of a sentence.	<i>By foregrounding the deadline in the subject line, the writer signals urgency.</i>
elision (noun)	The deliberate omission of information to manage what the reader focuses on.	<i>The elision of any reference to the missed deadline was a deliberate strategic choice.</i>
mitigation (noun)	Language that softens, qualifies, or reduces the force of a statement.	<i>The phrase "it may be that" is a form of mitigation.</i>
stance (noun)	The writer's expressed attitude or degree of commitment towards their message.	<i>The writer's stance shifts from cautious and hedged to direct and assertive.</i>
discourse marker (noun)	A word or phrase used to organise or connect ideas in a text.	<i>Discourse markers such as "in this regard" give formal emails their coherent structure.</i>
presupposition (noun)	Something assumed to be true within a statement, used to steer the reader.	<i>The phrase "as you are no doubt aware" contains a presupposition.</i>
framing (noun)	The way information is presented to influence how it is interpreted.	<i>The framing of the email positioned the delay as a shared problem.</i>
assertion (noun)	At C1: the degree to which a writer commits to a claim.	<i>Moving from "it would appear" to "it is clear that" represents a shift in assertion.</i>
register shift (noun)	A deliberate change in formality level within a single text.	<i>The register shift in the final paragraph signals that the writer means business.</i>
epistemic modality (noun)	The grammatical expression of the writer's degree of certainty via modal verbs.	<i>Choosing "might" over "will" is an example of epistemic modality.</i>
agency (noun)	The degree to which an actor is presented as the cause of an action in a text.	<i>Saying "mistakes were made" removes agency entirely.</i>

Exercise 1: Sentence Transformation

Rewrite each sentence as instructed. There are no structural hints at C1 level.

1. We cancelled the contract because the terms were not met.

Instruction: **NOMINALISATION** — remove direct agency

2. Someone made errors in the original document.

Instruction: **PASSIVE VOICE** — remove agency entirely

3. We will probably be able to deliver by the end of the month.

Instruction: **EPISTEMIC MODALITY** — signal lower certainty, do not use "probably"

4. The meeting was a failure because no one had prepared adequately.

Instruction: **FRAMING** — reframe as a shared issue, not an assignment of blame

5. I am writing to tell you that your application has been rejected.

Instruction: **NOMINALISATION** and **FORMAL REGISTER** — soften the impact

6. As you know, the deadline passed two weeks ago.

Instruction: **PRESUPPOSITION** — signal the reader should know without stating it so directly

Exercise 2: Error Identification

Each sentence may contain one error (register, precision, or collocation) or no error. Underline the error and write the correction. If correct, write "Correct".

1. The termination of the agreement was effected following the contractor's repeated failure to meet the stipulated milestones.

Error: _____ Correction: _____

2. The framing of this issue as a shared problem is a deliberate tactic to reduce individual blame.

Error: _____ Correction: _____

3. The writer's assertion becomes notably more decisive in the third paragraph, where hedging gives way to direct statement.

Error: _____ Correction: _____

4. By putting the disclaimer at the start of the email, the writer foregrounds the legal risk before any substantive content is read.

Error: _____ Correction: _____

5. The elision of any reference to the previous agreement appears to be calculated rather than accidental.

Error: _____ Correction: _____

6. The use of might rather than will demonstrates epistemic certainty about the projected outcome.

Error: _____ Correction: _____

7. The passive construction in this sentence reduces agency — no specific actor is identified as responsible for the delay.

Error: _____ Correction: _____

8. The register shifts noticeably in the final paragraph, where the formal and hedged tone of the opening is abandoned in favour of direct assertion.

Error: _____ Correction: _____

Exercise 3: Matching

Match each word or phrase (A) to its definition (B). Several definitions are deliberately close in meaning.

A – Word / Phrase	B – Definition
1. nominalisation ____	7. The way information is presented to influence how it is interpreted — what is included, excluded, and emphasised
2. foregrounding ____	2. Placing the most important or strategically significant element at the start of a sentence or message
3. elision ____	4. The grammatical expression of the writer's degree of certainty, using modal verbs such as may, might, or must
4. epistemic modality ____	3. The deliberate omission of information to manage what the reader focuses on
5. presupposition ____	8. The degree to which a person or organisation is presented as the active cause of an action in a text
6. register shift ____	1. Converting a verb or adjective into a noun to add formality and remove a sense of active agency
7. framing ____	5. Something assumed to be true within a statement, used strategically to steer the reader's understanding
8. agency ____	6. A deliberate or inadvertent change in formality level within a single text, which can signal a change in intent

Exercise 4: Register Analysis

Study each pair of versions and answer the question about the register difference.

Version A — Formal

It has come to our attention that the deliverables outlined in the initial scope of work have not been completed within the timeframe stipulated.

Version B — Less formal

We've noticed that the work you were supposed to finish by the deadline hasn't been done.

1. Version A uses nominalisation twice. Which option correctly identifies both instances?

Answer: _____

Version A — Formal

The decision to proceed was, it would appear, predicated on assumptions that have since proved unfounded.

Version B — Less formal

They decided to go ahead based on assumptions that turned out to be wrong.

2. Which strategy does Version A use that Version B does not, and what is its effect?

Answer: _____

Exercise 5: Contextual Rewriting

Each sentence is grammatically correct but strategically inappropriate. Rewrite it to suit the context. There is no single correct answer — model answers are provided in the key.

1. Context: You are a lawyer writing to the opposing party. Signal that your client does not accept blame without saying so directly.

Inappropriate version: "Our client did not cause the project to fail."

Your version:

2. Context: A senior manager writing to a junior employee who missed a deadline. Make clear it is serious without sounding aggressive.

Inappropriate version: "You missed the deadline. This is a serious problem."

Your version:

3. Context: Your company is announcing job losses. Frame this as a positive strategic decision.

Inappropriate version: "We are cutting jobs to save money."

Your version:

4. Context: Responding to a client complaint — acknowledge the issue without admitting legal liability.

Inappropriate version: "We were wrong and it was our fault."

Your version:

Exercise 6: Paragraph Gap Fill

Complete the email extract with the correct word or phrase. Choose the option that best fits the register, stance, and communicative purpose.

Word Bank: nominalisation | agency | foregrounding | epistemic modality | presupposition | register shift

1. Among the most prevalent is ____: the conversion of verbs into noun phrases.

2. ...which simultaneously adds formality and removes ____, making it harder to identify a responsible party.

3. Equally significant is ____: the placement of the most strategically important element at the beginning.
4. A third key device is ____: the calibrated use of modal verbs to signal the writer's degree of commitment.
5. Finally, skilled writers exploit ____ — embedding assumptions within statements.
6. Particularly telling is the ____ that often occurs in the final paragraph.

TEACHER ANSWER KEY

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Exercise 1: Sentence Transformation

1. We cancelled the contract because the terms were not met.

Answer: The cancellation of the contract followed the failure to meet the agreed terms.

2. Someone made errors in the original document.

Answer: Errors were made in the original document.

3. We will probably be able to deliver by the end of the month.

Answer: We may be able to deliver by the end of the month.

4. The meeting was a failure because no one had prepared adequately.

Answer: The meeting did not achieve its intended outcomes and it may be that further preparation would benefit future discussions.

5. I am writing to tell you that your application has been rejected.

Answer: I am writing to inform you of the outcome of your application, which has unfortunately been unsuccessful.

6. As you know, the deadline passed two weeks ago.

Answer: It will not have escaped your attention that the deadline passed some two weeks ago.

Exercise 2: Error Identification

1. The termination of the agreement was effected following the contractor's repeated failure to meet the stipulated milestones.

Answer: Correct — no error.

2. The framing of this issue as a shared problem is a deliberate tactic to reduce individual blame.

Answer: Correct — no error.

3. The writer's assertion becomes notably more decisive in the third paragraph, where hedging gives way to direct statement.

Error: "notably" → Correction: "markedly"

Reason: Precision error — "notably" is conversational; "markedly" is the more precise formal adverb for describing a clear change in degree.

4. By putting the disclaimer at the start of the email, the writer foregrounds the legal risk before any substantive content is read.

Error: "putting" → Correction: "foregrounding"

Reason: Strategic register error — "putting" is too informal; "foregrounding" is both the appropriate verb and carries the strategic meaning required in this analytical context.

5. The elision of any reference to the previous agreement appears to be calculated rather than accidental.

Answer: Correct — no error.

6. The use of might rather than will demonstrates epistemic certainty about the projected outcome.

Error: "certainty" → Correction: "uncertainty"

Reason: Semantic error — "might" signals epistemic uncertainty, not certainty.

7. The passive construction in this sentence reduces agency — no specific actor is identified as responsible for the delay.

Answer: Correct — no error.

8. The register shifts noticeably in the final paragraph, where the formal and hedged tone of the opening is abandoned in favour of direct assertion.

Answer: Correct — no error.

Exercise 3: Matching

1. nominalisation → 1

Converting a verb or adjective into a noun to add formality and remove a sense of active agency

2. foregrounding → 2

Placing the most important or strategically significant element at the start of a sentence or message

3. elision → 3

The deliberate omission of information to manage what the reader focuses on

4. epistemic modality → 4

The grammatical expression of the writer's degree of certainty, using modal verbs such as may, might, or must

5. presupposition → 5

Something assumed to be true within a statement, used strategically to steer the reader's understanding

6. register shift → 6

A deliberate or inadvertent change in formality level within a single text, which can signal a change in intent

7. framing → 7

The way information is presented to influence how it is interpreted — what is included, excluded, and emphasised

8. agency → 8

The degree to which a person or organisation is presented as the active cause of an action in a text

Exercise 4: Register Analysis

1. Version A uses nominalisation twice. Which option correctly identifies both instances?

Answer: "It has come to our attention" and "the initial scope of work"

Explanation: "It has come to our attention" converts the act of noticing into a formal noun phrase, and "scope of work" nominalises what was to be done, increasing formality and removing direct accusation.

2. Which strategy does Version A use that Version B does not, and what is its effect?

Answer: Epistemic modality via "it would appear" — distances the writer from the claim, softening the implied criticism

Explanation: "It would appear" is an epistemic hedge — the writer presents the conclusion as an observation rather than a firm accusation.

Exercise 5: Contextual Rewriting — Model Answers

Note: Many acceptable answers exist. The model answers below demonstrate one appropriate approach.

1. "Our client did not cause the project to fail."

Model answer: It would appear that the factors contributing to the unsuccessful outcome of this project were multiple and complex. We are not, at this stage, in a position to accept that responsibility rests solely with our client.

2. "You missed the deadline. This is a serious problem."

Model answer: It will not have escaped your attention that the submission deadline elapsed without the relevant documentation being received. The implications of this omission are not insignificant.

3. "We are cutting jobs to save money."

Model answer: Following a comprehensive review of our operational structure, the Board has determined that a programme of strategic reorganisation is necessary to ensure long-term sustainability. This process will involve a rationalisation of our workforce.

4. "We were wrong and it was our fault."

Model answer: It would appear that there was a breakdown in our usual processes on this occasion, and we sincerely regret any difficulties this may have caused. We are conducting a thorough review and will communicate our findings shortly.

Exercise 6: Paragraph Gap Fill

1. Among the most prevalent is ____: the conversion of verbs into noun phrases.

Answer: nominalisation

2. ...which simultaneously adds formality and removes ____, making it harder to identify a responsible party.

Answer: agency

3. Equally significant is ____: the placement of the most strategically important element at the beginning.

Answer: foregrounding

4. A third key device is ____: the calibrated use of modal verbs to signal the writer's degree of commitment.

Answer: epistemic modality

5. Finally, skilled writers exploit ____ — embedding assumptions within statements.

Answer: presupposition

6. Particularly telling is the ____ that often occurs in the final paragraph.

Answer: register shift