

Register: the tenor of conversation, encompassing eye contact, body position, gestures, facial expressions, and rhythm.

Imagine **three interactions** between colleagues at work...

▶ In the first interaction, a woman tells her colleague about her recent weekend. Maybe they're in the lunch area at work. "Oh my gosh, it was such a great weekend," begins the first. She's recounting a trip with some friends to a nearby city. As she does so, her eye contact drifts away from and comes back to her colleague, as if she was gazing out at some latent image of the weekend projected on a nearby wall. Her hands move as she describes it. "We were in this funky coffee shop with old records up the walls," she says, as her hands make a sweeping gesture alluding to the locations of said vinyl. She stands with her hips to the side reclining against a wall perhaps. She's squinting slightly. Her weight is on one foot. Her words run together in a pitter patter-like rhythm. All of these things – her inconsistent eye contact; her use of extensive, sweeping gestures; her asymmetrical, relaxed posture; her words running into one another as if each was not so critical in its own right but part of a larger narrative – suggest casualness, informality, a sense of ease. *We're just talking here*, she seems to say. *You can interrupt me anytime. If you have to walk away in the middle to do something else, that's okay too.*

{ *The **register** of this conversation is **casual**, and many teachers use something like it in the classroom.* }

▶ Now imagine a second conversation in which our speaker suddenly adjusts to a more formal register. She stands up straight and holds her body symmetrical. She looks directly at her colleague. Her chin rises slightly. She puts her hands behind her back (no wide, sweeping gestures here; in fact you can't even see her hands). You couldn't read or get distracted by her gestures even if you wanted to because you can't see her hands. The speaker could be saying anything, but let's imagine her reciting the pledge of allegiance. "I pledge allegiance," she says, "to the flag." There's a clear distinction between her words now. Each is an important part of the solemn ritual. Her articulation of the syllables is clearer. She doesn't ask her colleague to strike the formal hands-behind-the-back pose she's using, but when the colleague sees it, she knows something important is happening and is likely to stand up straight herself and maybe even put her own hands behind her back in conscious mimicry.

{ *A **formal register**, it turns out, bespeaks the importance of the message and causes a purposeful attentiveness in the listener. And transplanted into the classroom, that's powerful.* }

▶ Imagine our two colleagues in a third conversation. The building is on fire. The first colleague enters the lunch area. She places her hands firmly on the shoulders of her colleague. “Listen,” she says. “There’s an emergency. I need you to come with me right away. I need you to put everything down and follow me. Do you understand? Good. Let’s go.” She’s leaning closer than she would in a mere formal pose, and she’s punching her words. The pauses are actually more noticeable, though you might have expected her rush. Her eyes are locked more than steady. She makes a gesture toward the fire exit with a crisp, truncated, chopping motion.

{ *She is not panicked; not blathering and rushed – just **singularly focused**.* }

Is this the tone you want to use in your classroom to ensure compliance? Maybe and maybe not...

It has to be saved for truly urgent situations and most control-oriented interactions should be of the garden variety; made early in the process before things become urgent. Overused, urgency shows weakness and lack of control. But in the rare situations when it’s needed, it can be useful.

*What are the **four different registers** described here? (HINT: The third scenario describes TWO.)*

When, if ever, would a teacher use each?