

# BBC Learning English

## How to ...

### *Formal greetings*



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**Jackie:** Hello! I'm Jackie Dalton. This programme is about greetings and the language you might use if you're greeting people in quite formal situations, when you want to sound polite. I'd like you to start by listening to this greeting. Try to guess what the situation might be.

#### **Clip**

Good morning, sir.

**Jackie:** Using 'sir' in a greeting sounds very formal. It gives extra status or importance to the person you are talking to and there are several situations where you might hear it. One of the most common situations is in the service industry. It could be a hotel receptionist talking to a guest, a waiter talking to a customer in a restaurant. Or it could be in a shop - anywhere where people are dealing with customers or clients. If you were speaking to a woman, you wouldn't say 'sir' - you would say 'madam'.

#### **Clip**

Good morning, madam.

**Jackie:** It's nearly always the people *offering* the service who would use this kind of language. If a waiter says 'good evening, sir' you would just reply with 'good evening' you wouldn't say 'good evening, sir' back. This is because, in this particular situation, you are the one being given the most importance, so you don't need to show this extra sign of respect. Likewise, if you walk into a hotel and the receptionist says 'good

afternoon, madam', it would usually sound strange to say 'good afternoon, madam' back.

As well as in the service industry, there are other situations where you might hear 'sir' and 'madam'. Listen to this one and guess what the situation might be.

### **Clip**

Good morning, sir. It's a real honour to have you here.

**Jackie:** The situation that makes me think of is of greeting a VIP - perhaps a very important politician or leader who you meet. In some cases, people use it when they are greeting someone much older than they are, as a sign of respect. Or you may occasionally hear it used in the workplace, where employees want to show respect for their superiors. As you listen to this clip, again note how only the employee uses the word 'sir'.

### **Clip**

Good morning, sir.

Hello, James.

**Jackie:** So far, we've looked over some of those situations where you might use very formal language in greetings, such as 'sir' or 'madam'. You might use it in the service industry, with VIPs, with much older people and, sometimes, with bosses at work. But, as well as using these kinds of words, what else is it that makes language in greetings sound more formal and polite? We're going to hear two different versions of a greeting between James and his boss Mr Jones. Listen and decide which one is the most formal and think about why. Here's the first one:

### **Clip**

Morning!

Hi! How's it going?

Good thanks – you?

Yeah, fine.

**Jackie:** Now listen to the second greeting.

### **Clip**

Good morning, Mr Jones.

Hello, James. How are you?

I'm very well, thank you. How are you?

Fine, thank you.

**Jackie:** The second greeting was more formal. Why? Well one of the most obvious differences is in how long the phrases are. 'Good morning' sounds more formal than 'morning' because 'morning' is shorter and it's a slightly lazier way of greeting someone, if you like. 'Hello' is also a bit more formal than 'hi'. 'I'm very well, thank you' also sounds more formal than 'nine, thanks' or 'good, thanks' again, mainly because it takes longer to say. This doesn't mean you should never say 'hi' in formal situations, it's just that if you want to sound more polite, using more complete words and phrases will help. Listen again to the two exchanges and listen out for those differences. First, the less formal one.

### **Clip**

Morning!

Hi! How's it going?

Good thanks – you?

Yeah, fine.

**Jackie:** Now the more formal one.

### Clip

Good morning, Mr Jones.

Hello, James. How are you?

I'm very well thank you. How are you?

Fine, thank you.

**Jackie:** So words that are longer tend to sound more formal and polite, while shorter, abbreviated words are more likely to sound informal and friendly. Now let's look at some other handy phrases you could use in greetings. We're about to hear another clip. Madeleine and Angus are both at the same dinner party. They've met a couple of times before, but haven't seen each other for a while. Listen to their conversation.

### Clip

Hello Madeleine. It's lovely to see you again: how are you?

Hello, Angus. I'm very well, thank you. It's been a long time, hasn't it? How are things with you?

**Jackie:** 'Lovely to see you again' is a nice expression, often used when you haven't seen someone for a while. Madeline says 'It's been a long time, hasn't it?' another nice thing you can say in that situation. She finishes it with 'How are things with you?' another way of saying 'how are you?' Listen again.

### Clip

Hello Madeleine. It's lovely to see you again: how are you?

Hello, Angus. I'm very well, thank you. It's been a long time, hasn't it? How are things with you?

**Jackie:** Now here's a recap of the language from this programme.

good morning

good afternoon, sir  
good evening, madam  
how are you?  
how are things with you?  
I'm very well, thank you.  
it's lovely to see you again  
it's been a long time, hasn't it?

**Jackie:** And that brings us to the end of the programme. But do keep practising your English on our website [bbclearningenglish.com](http://bbclearningenglish.com).