How to greet people formally

Quiz

1) It's ______ to see you again!
   a) lovely
   b) love
   c) likely

2) It's been a long time, ______ it?
   a) haven't
   b) hasn't
   c) has

3) According to the programme, which of these is a situation where you might use formal greetings?
   a) buying something from a shop
   b) ordering something online
   c) meeting a VIP
Answers

1) a)

2) b)

3) c)
Transcript

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.

EXAMPLE
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.

EXAMPLE
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 is 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.
EXAMPLE
Good morning, sir. It’s a real honour to have you here.

Jackie
The situation this 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.

EXAMPLE

Employee
Good morning, sir.

Boss
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:

EXAMPLE

Employee
Morning!

Mr Jones
Hi! How’s it going?

Employee
Good thanks – you?
Mr Jones
Yeah, fine.

Jackie
Now listen to the second greeting.

EXAMPLE

Employee
Good morning, Mr Jones.

Mr Jones
Hello, James. How are you?

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

Mr Jones
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 fine, 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:

EXAMPLE

Employee
Morning!
Mr Jones
Hi! How's it going?

Employee
Good thanks – you?

Mr Jones
Yeah, fine.

Jackie
Now the more formal one:

EXAMPLE

Employee
Good morning, Mr Jones.

Mr Jones
Hello, James. How are you?

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

Mr Jones
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.

EXAMPLE

Angus
Hello Madeleine. It's lovely to see you again. How are you?
**Madeleine**
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.

**Angus**
Hello Madeleine. It's lovely to see you again. How are you?

**Madeleine**
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?

And that brings us to the end of the programme. But do keep practising your English on our website bbclearningenglish.com.