



## ***How and When to Use the Formal Lei in Italian***

When you want to use the formal *Lei*, **you use the third person feminine** regardless of whether the person you're talking to is a man or a woman.

Here are some examples:

*Come stai?* (informal) -> *Come sta?* (formal)

*Sai dov'è la banca?* (informal) -> *Sa dov'è la banca?* (formal)

*Puoi dirmi come arrivare alla stazione?* (informal) -> *Può dirmi come arrivare alla stazione?* (formal)

*Mi porti il conto?* (informal) -> *Mi porta il conto?* (formal)

When you need to use direct or indirect pronouns when using the formal *Lei*, you always use **La** (direct pronoun) or **Le** (indirect pronoun).

Examples with direct pronouns:

*Voglio informarLa che ha ottenuto il lavoro* (I want to inform you that you got the job)

*Posso chiamarLa domani alle cinque?* (Can I call you tomorrow at five?)

*Può parlare più forte? Non La sento* (Can you speak louder? I can't hear you)

Examples with indirect pronouns:

*Posso chiederLe dove ha preso quella borsa?* (Can I ask you where you got that bag?)

*Quando posso telefonarLe? Non vorrei disturbare* (When can I call you? I don't want to disturb)

*Non Le ho detto che abbiamo cancellato l'appuntamento, mi scusi* (I haven't told you we canceled the appointment, I am sorry)

Now that you know how to use the formal *Lei*, the problem is when to use it.

The general rule says that you should use the formal *Lei* **when you do not know the person you are speaking to** or when the person is older than you are, but it depends on the context and your choice as a speaker. For example, I think that using the formal *Lei* is very important because it

shows respect for the person you are speaking with. On the contrary, my husband loves using the informal *Tu* and says that sometimes I am too formal.

But let's see some examples.

I am at the post office (or a similar place) and many people are waiting in line. If I need to ask a question to some of these people, I will always use the *Lei* form. However, if the person I am asking for information is young, a teenager, or a twentysomething let's say, I would then use the *Tu*. But if it is the clerk or the office manager who's young, then I would always use the polite *Lei* because **I want to be respectful of their role.**

The same goes for bars, restaurants, and shops. My husband is **very informal** in those environments, while I still follow the "be respectful" role. This means that, even though the shop assistant, the waiter, or the barista is way younger than me, I would still use the *Lei*. Then I would switch to the *Tu* form only if the situation gets more informal but this doesn't happen frequently. Call me an old lady, but I still believe that **the *Lei* is mandatory in work environments** (among strangers, not colleagues, of course).

When it comes to school, **students commonly use the polite *Lei* to speak to the teachers.**

Throughout high school, the student uses the *Lei* to speak to the teacher, while the teacher uses the *Tu* to speak to the student. In university, however, both students and professors use the *Lei* (unless things have changed recently!). On the contrary, in most language schools, where students are older and the environment is way more informal, it is common to use the *Tu* from day one.

Summarizing, even though using the *Tu* is way easier, getting used to using the *Lei* at least in the most obvious situations is important if you want your language to be more refined. So, when you do not know the person you are having a conversation with and when such a person is older than you (or your age, if you are an adult), it is advisable to use the *Lei*.

