

Tone and Formality in Academic Writing

Being aware of one's audience is a crucial part of successful writing, whether you are writing an e-mail to a friend, a memo to a business colleague, or a research paper for class. Writers need to consider what the audience's expectations are, what assumptions they can and can't make about their audience, and what kind of attitude/personality comes through in their writing. Tone, a term for your manner of expression in speech or writing, is another way of saying "attitude," as in the attitude your readers will perceive when they peruse your text. Many times, writers inadvertently choose an inappropriate tone for their writing, which can cause misunderstandings and frustration.

Tone exists in speech, too, but when you are speaking to someone else, your body language and vocal inflections give cues about your attitude, so misunderstandings are less frequent. But writing lacks those cues; with only the words on the page, you have to make your attitude clear to your readers. This is no simple feat, and it might take some practice.

Imagine that you're hungry and looking for someone to have lunch with. How would you ask your best friend to join you? Now imagine that you're asking your grandmother the same question. What about your boss? A customer? Your professor? A stranger at a cafe? You would probably choose different phrasing for each of these individuals. Why is that?

When you sit down to write, try to choose language that seems appropriate for your audience. To make your academic writing more "academic" and formal, try some of the suggestions below.

- ❖ **Avoid using "you" and "your."** These pronouns make your writing sound like you are addressing a single individual rather than the wider, general audience that academic writing usually targets.
- ❖ **Avoid using "we."** "We" may sound inclusive, but are you certain you've included *all* potential readers? Often, the "we" is just a subset of readers with a similar background to the writer; for instance, is it really true that "we all run out and buy the newest iPhone on the first day"? When a reader feels excluded by an assumption about "we," the paper loses authority.
- ❖ **Eliminate contractions (like *isn't, don't, you're, etc.*).** Contractions are considered too informal for academic writing. Likewise, don't fall into habits that would be appropriate only for a more concise form of communication, like texting or tweeting. *im out front r u coming* is an effective text to your friend, but it's a lousy sentence to include in a thesis paper or an email to your professor or potential employer. Spell out words, capitalize, and punctuate.
- ❖ **Check your hyperbole.** Hyperbole refers to excessive, extreme, or total statements. They often use "absolute" modifiers, like *never, always, or everyone*. For example, "Throughout all of human history, everyone has always hated paying taxes." (Really? Everyone? Even a hundred thousand years ago?) Using hyperbolic language sacrifices credibility.
- ❖ **Avoid run-on sentences.** Run-on sentences are common in speech and other informal interactions because we just keep adding on to something we wanted to say. In writing, however, these run-ons become distracting and hard to follow.
- ❖ **Don't try *too hard*.** If you are only using complicated sentence constructions or uncommon thesaurus words in order to "sound smart," know that most readers prefer clear, concise language. Avoid using thesaurus words unless you are familiar with their usage.