

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 formal paper for a 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 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 a friend to go to lunch with. How would you ask that person to join you? Now imagine that you're asking your grandmother the same question. What about your boss? A client? Your professor? The president? You would probably choose different phrasing for each of these individuals. Why is that?

When you sit down to write, consider whether your audience falls into one of these categories (or others you might have thought of). Try to choose language that seems appropriate for that audience.

Academic writing typically requires a formal, professional tone. To make your writing more formal and "academic-sounding," try some of the suggestions below.

- 1. Avoid using *you, your, etc.*** These pronouns make your writing sound like you are addressing a single individual rather than the wider, general audience that academic writing usually targets.
- 2. Eliminate contractions and slang.** Contractions (like *isn't, don't, you're, etc.*) are considered too informal and conversational for academic writing.

Slang is appropriate for conversations and e-mails, but not research papers, or other formal writing. If you're not sure if it's slang, pick another word or phrase just to be on the safe side.

3. 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.

4. Leave the IM spellings and capitalization quirks in Instant Messenger. Yes, "r u comin? i c u there!" makes sense in cyberspace, but you need to abide by standard spelling, punctuation, and capitalization in formal academic writing. (*Hint:* The same goes for e-mailing professors, as well as current/potential employers.)

Thank you to:

http://www.temple.edu/writingctr/student_resources/tone_and_formality.htm