ACADEMIC TONE

WHAT IS TONE?

What do we mean when we talk about tone in writing? Tone refers to how the writer's voice and attitude come through in the paper. The overall tone of a piece of writing impacts the reader and their experience just as someone's tone of voice in a conversation impacts a listener.

To utilize an appropriate tone, a writer must match the seriousness and professionalism of the language to the seriousness and professionalism of the topic, audience, genre, and context (the rhetorical situation). You must always pay attention to these rhetorical elements because not all classroom assignments require academic tone; you might have a marketing professor who wants you to create social media posts or a composition professor who wants you to write a personal narrative. When in doubt about the tone you should use, speak to your instructor.

Academic tone involves word choice, but that does not mean using the biggest words possible. Clarity is always a goal in academic writing, so make sure your language is formal but still comprehensible for your audience and fitting of the context and genre.

The process of shifting your tone to be more academic not that different from translating – you are essentially switching between one language (common language) and another (academic language). To help, this handout will go over some of the most important aspects of academic tone to help you identify the proper tone for your writing task.

JARGON

When writing academically, it is important to be aware of your word choice, including when to use jargon. Jargon is the term for specialized language within a field or profession that most anyone outside of the field or profession would be unaware of. When deciding whether to use jargon, consider whether or not your peers in the field would understand the terms you are using. If you need to use jargon but are unsure if your audience will understand, it is best to define the term on first use to guarantee comprehension.

WRITING IN THE FIRST PERSON

To write in an academic tone, writers might avoid using any first-person pronouns, such as "I," "we," or "our." Though this can seem like a nuisance, it is better to speak in an objective voice. Of course, there are exceptions to this norm and sometimes a professor might ask you to write in the first person in a more narrative writing task. Pay attention to the assignment instructions or ask your professor when you are unsure.

FORMALITY OF LANGUAGE

Formal language is what we typically use in writing when we are communicating serious information to audiences we do not know. Informal language is what we typically use when speaking when we are communicating anything to audiences we do know.

Unlike many foreign languages, English does not have word endings which indicate levels of respect. The tone and vocabulary convey whether an author is being polite or casual. For instance, "I can do the thing" and "sorry to keep y'all waiting" are informal, while "I am able to perform the task" and "I apologize for keeping all of you waiting" are formal. Pay attention to word choice, explicit articulation of the subject, use of contractions, and specificity of terms. You might imagine yourself speaking to a grandparent, a boss, or a professor or imagine how you would speak if you were wearing a business suit as a way of choosing language that comes across as more professional and serious.

AVOID CLICHÉS AND SLANG

Clichés, or commonly-used phrases or colloquialisms, work to convey often-referenced ideas or shared experiences: "all's well that ends well" or "every cloud has a silver lining," for instance. Clichés do not say something new; instead, they use generalized and overused language to say something old or already familiar to the reader. Clichés are inappropriate for academic writing because the goal of any paper is to say something original.

Slang, or very informal and common language, is most often utilized in speech and in text messages and is context dependent: "She is feeling salty" or "Spill the tea now," for instance. Slang typically does not convey the correct level of formality; furthermore, a society's usage of slang quickly changes and may confuse a reader who is unfamiliar with it.

To avoid using clichés or slang, you should identify what the term or phrase is trying to say and rephrase those ideas in your own words that connect to the message you are trying to convey. Also, make certain that the idea is one that is necessary; you can simply delete the cliché or slang phrase if they do not add to your message.