

Tone

Tone is how the **author of a work conveys their position or attitude toward their subject** through their word usage and sentence arrangement. Oftentimes, tone can be associated with different **registers**, or the **level of formality for a certain purpose for a particular audience**. College-level papers often use an **academic tone**, so this handout will focus on strategies to accomplish this.



How Do I Decide What Tone To Use?

Tone can often come across unintentionally, but when writers are looking to cater their tone is catered to their work, they should consider **G.A.P. (Genre, Audience, and Purpose)**:

- **Genre:** The genre of writing refers to how a piece of writing is categorized based on the stylistic characteristics or functional features it has. For instance, when writing an email, it is characteristic of the genre to include a greeting and a signature. In academic writing, it would be expected to introduce the audience to the topic and provide a general overview, incorporate clear argumentation with claims and evidence, and present an effective conclusion.
- **Audience:** Writers should consider the audience they are writing for. Writing to your audience means considering previous knowledge they may have on the subject and expectations they may have for your work. For instance, a professor may know the technical jargon used in a piece, while a general audience may not be familiar with it.
- **Purpose:** Writers must consider the overarching purpose of their work to decide what tone best suits their needs. For example, if a writer is working on an argumentative paper, their tone towards sources that go against their position may be critical to point out flaws in their stance. If a writer is writing a persuasive argument, they might use a respectful and authoritative tone to get their audience to agree with them.

Academic Tone

Academic tone is often used in formal assessments like papers, literature reviews, annotated bibliographies, research proposals, etc. Not all assessments require or benefit from an academic tone, so pay attention to the professor's and assignment's requirements. Below are common requirements and strategies to successfully integrate academic tone.



Avoid Second Person Pronouns

Using second-person pronouns, like “you,” can create a conversational or casual tone. “You” can also come across as vague when the writer intends to address a group more specifically. Writers should consider who exactly is included in this “you” group (e.g., individuals, society, Americans, teenagers, workers, professors, etc.) and use that specific word instead.

Tone (continued)

Consider How Judgment Comes Across

Tone can often be used in writing subconsciously. Writers may have opinions about their subject matter that are unintentionally conveyed when trying to appear neutral, which is why it is important to analyze how word choice may indicate a writer's judgment or attitude. For example, a writer may explain actions as "wrong," which shows a value judgment. This writer can instead use more specific language to maintain neutrality, such as "unjust," "improper," or "prejudiced."



Avoid Clichés and Generalizations

Clichés and generalizations can weaken a paper because they are vague and not typically backed by scholarly sources. Below are some examples:



- **Generalization:** "Since the dawn of time." / "Throughout history."
 - Use specific language to refer to the time period/era being referenced. For example, "Since the 1970s...," "In early 20th century America..."
- **Generalization:** "Everyone knows that."
 - Not everyone will know exactly what is being communicated here. Provide a specific reference or piece of evidence to support a claim like this, such as: "Several studies have found that excessive phone usage increases the likelihood of low self-esteem" (Smith, 2014; Trainor et al., 2019; Williams, 2021).
- **Cliché:** "At the end of the day, ..."
 - Be more specific by using transitional phrases or signposting. For example, "Ultimately, the results indicate..."

Avoid Conversational or Casual Phrasing

Conversational or casual phrasing can make a writer appear less authoritative in delivering their arguments. Writers should pay attention to the following instances of conversational/casual phrasing:

- **Transitions:** Rather than using conversational transitions like "actually," "literally," or "basically," writers should use more formal transitions. Learn more in our [transitions handout](#).
- **Amounts:** Amounts should also be specific and suit the context of the sentence. Writers should avoid vague amounts like "a little" or "a bunch" and instead use phrases like "the majority" or "a significant amount."
- **Contractions:** Contractions like "don't," "shouldn't," and "I've" can be swapped out for the full phrase to appear more formal ("Do not," "Should not," "I have").



Tone relies on a writer's word choice. Learn more about in our [word choice handout](#).