

Tone

Tone is the attitude conveyed in writing or speaking.

Imagine the conversations you might have with these people:

- friends who are with you at a party
- a police officer who has stopped you for speeding
- an employer who is interviewing you

Each of these conversations will have a different “tone” depending on your purpose and audience. You may be boisterous and joking to entertain your friends. You may be respectful and apologetic to avoid a ticket from the officer. You may be positive and persuasive to receive a job offer from the employer. Your tone will be expressed through your voice, your gestures, and your choice of words and sentences,

Like speakers, writers also create tone, but they do so with words only, and therefore must use care in their choices of words and expressions. Tone can range from formal and serious to casual and humorous. Tone can express feelings such as anger or excitement, or tone can express thoughtfulness and objectivity. **Your task as a writer is to craft a tone that is suitable for your audience and purpose, and maintain that tone throughout the written work.**

An informal or highly emotional tone may be appropriate for some of your college writing, such as reflection or narrative pieces. But most of your college writing will require an objective, professional tone. Your audience is often your instructor and fellow students, and your purpose is to inform or persuade these curious readers. They expect to learn something from a thoughtful, serious paper written for college-level readers. This does not mean that your papers should be full of big words and stuffy phrases. All audiences appreciate clear, concise, vivid writing, with fresh ideas and expression. Select words that precisely convey what you want to say (using a thesaurus can help), and write in a tone that engages and respects your audience, and convinces them of your sincerity and your authority on your subject.

Below are some factors that influence tone. Keep these in mind as you do college writing.

- **Point of view**

A first person point of view (writing in the “I” voice) is appropriate for reflective writing or narration because it emphasizes the personal experience of the writer. But sometimes it can create a tone that is too informal or chatty for a college paper. A third person point of view (which avoids the use of personal pronouns) emphasizes the *content* of a paper and some instructors require it for some assignments. Check with your instructor about point of view.

- **Contractions**

Contractions are two words that have been combined using an apostrophe. Here are some examples: didn’t, couldn’t, they’re, isn’t, can’t, shouldn’t.

- **Diction**

Diction is the choice of words and expression a writer uses. For more information on diction, see Word Choice. College-level readers expect precise, vivid language that demonstrates the writer’s critical

thinking skills. Here are some types of diction to avoid in formal writing because they do not set a formal, thoughtful, well-reasoned tone.

Slang

Slang is the use of informal words and expressions that are not considered Standard English. Slang contributes to a casual, nonprofessional tone that may be useful in creative writing, but it's not appropriate for a formal paper.

Slang: The contractor screwed up the job, and the people who saw the building collapse were totally freaked out.

Standard English: The contractor did substandard work, and the people who saw the building collapse were shocked.

Shrill or insulting words

Shrill or insulting words express contempt for ideas or people in a nonspecific, disrespectful way. Readers expect reasoned statements rather than vague, emotionally charged words.

Shrill: The death penalty is ridiculous.

Even worse: People who support the death penalty are ridiculous.

Specific: The death penalty should be abolished for a number of reasons.

Hyperbolic language

Hyperbolic language is the use of exaggeration to make a point. It is often used in humorous writing. "The dog was so ugly that even the fleas moved out," is an example of hyperbole. In serious writing, exaggeration can make readers question the credibility of a paper. It also makes your job as a writer more difficult. Readers expect you to use evidence and reasoning to support what you say, and you won't be able to support an exaggerated claim.

Hyperbolic language: Legalization of marijuana will reduce prison overcrowding. Our prisons are full of people who did nothing but smoke marijuana.

Accurate language: Legalization of marijuana may help reduce prison overcrowding. A report from the Office of National Drug Control Policy states that the majority of people imprisoned for marijuana are also guilty of more serious crimes. But the report also acknowledges that "We cannot categorically state that no simple marijuana user has ever received a jail or prison sentence" (ONDCP).

Sarcasm

Sarcasm is a way of using words to express contempt. It often involves stating the opposite of what the writer really means. “Yeah, like that would work!” is an example of sarcasm.

Sarcasm: The proposed tax cuts will definitely create jobs – IN CHINA.

Neutrally worded statement: Some economists suggest that the proposed tax cuts won’t create jobs in the United States. Corporations are more likely to use their savings to expand their overseas operations (USA).

Additional Resources:

[“Tone: A Matter of Attitude”](#) from the Capital Community College Guide to Grammar and Writing

[“Tone in Business Writing”](#) from the Purdue Online Writing Lab