

Tone is used to express the attitude you have toward your topic and audience. Writing with an effective tone can reinforce the purpose of your writing and help establish credibility with your audience. This handout provides general concepts about tone, but always write with your audience and assignment in mind.

Determine Your Tone

To determine an appropriate or effective tone for writing, consider the audience, context, and purpose of your work, which interact and influence each other in what is known as the rhetorical situation.

Audience

Your audience is the person or group you are writing to. Identifying your position in relation to your audience's **shared values, beliefs, concerns, and expectations** is crucial for creating a tone that will resonate with your audience. Consider these elements as you write, and adjust your tone accordingly.

Context

Your context is the broader conversation in which your writing exists. To better understand your context, consider elements such as **time, place, medium, genre, or type of writing**. While you may not always be able to control the context, you can determine the tone with which you enter the conversation.

Purpose

Your purpose is what you intend for your writing to accomplish. Whether you are writing to communicate information or express ideas, consider **what you want your audience to feel, believe, or do** after reading your work. Your tone should reflect your purpose.

Use an Effective Tone

Using an effective tone requires understanding genre, conventions, point of view, sentence structure, word choice, and consistency.

Genre and Disciplinary Conventions

Different genres, disciplines, or industries have different expectations of tone. For example, an audience for an official report may expect a professional tone, while an audience for a memoir may expect a more reflective tone. Sometimes these expectations are laid out in specific style guides, like APA, Chicago, or MLA. Follow genre expectations, and adjust your tone accordingly.

Point of View

The point of view you use changes the tone of your writing and can be determined by your relationship with the audience and the genre you are writing in. Select the point of view that best suits your project.

Point Of View	Pronouns	Effect on Tone
First Person	<ul style="list-style-type: none">I, me, myWe, us, our, ourselves	Can feel personal, reflective, or inclusive
Second Person	<ul style="list-style-type: none">You, yourYourselves	Can feel direct, commanding, or conversational
Third Person	<ul style="list-style-type: none">He, she, they, the authorThem, their, themselves	Can feel academic, authoritative, or impartial

Sentence Structure

You can improve the tone and readability of your work through intentional sentence structure.

- **Length and complexity:** Use a mix of sentence length and complexity to improve the rhythm and readability of your work. Short, direct sentences typically emphasize content and provide focus, while complex sentences can express nuance and thoughtfulness.
- **Punctuation:** Exclamation points, question marks, commas, parentheses, dashes, periods, and other punctuation can shift tone by expressing mood, changing pace, and shifting emphasis.
- **Active and passive voice:** Active voice prioritizes the subject and can make your tone feel more direct and clear. Passive voice emphasizes the action by deemphasizing or not including the sentence's actor but may feel disengaged or ambiguous if used unintentionally. Refer to genre conventions and expectations when deciding on voice.

Word Choice

Your word choice can have a noticeable effect on your tone.

- **Level of formality:** A formal tone is generally more regulated and serious, avoiding slang and casual language. On the other hand, an informal tone is typically more personal and conversational. The level of formality you should adopt depends on you and your audience's relationship to your topic.
- **Using and defining terms:** Sometimes your audience is unfamiliar with the subject and requires more background information. In this case, avoid or define unexplained jargon and terms. Other times, your audience is familiar with your subject matter, so they already understand key terms or common discussions around a topic. In this case, mirror language and conventions of the genre.
- **Avoid absolute language:** Absolute language can convey an attitude that is unintended. Certain words like *none*, *nobody*, or *never* can create generalizations which can make your claims sound biased, uninformed, or exaggerated. Likewise, words such as *all*, *every*, or *always* and even *proves* can make it sound like your stance is absolute, inarguable, or conclusive. Alternatively, words like *often*, *might*, or *may*, provide space for additional discussion or exploration.
- **Inappropriate or offensive language:** Appropriate language may be determined by culture and context. Refrain from using demeaning, dehumanizing, and disrespectful language. When referring to specific people or groups, ensure you are using current, appropriate, and respectful language determined by members of those groups.

Consistency

Once you establish a tone, maintain it throughout your writing. Shifting tones abruptly can confuse your reader. Seek feedback from others to check for consistency.