

Help With: Academic Tone



Like the expression, “It’s not what you said, but how you said it,” academic tone refers to your choice of words. This does not mean that you should write as though you ate a thesaurus, but academic papers should suggest a mood of professionalism and seriousness in the writer.

Avoiding Clichés

Using clichés and slang phrases in an academic paper weakens the credibility and professionalism of the writer. This is partly because slang changes quickly and can confuse future readers, and also because using clichés usually indicates lazy and imprecise thinking. Instead of using these phrases, replace them with more concise and clear text. Common clichés include:

They were broken-hearted to discover that...
As a boy, I always dreamed that...
One of the biggest problems America faces today is...
...the best piece of literature ever written.

Avoiding Casual or Slang Language

Unlike some languages, English doesn’t have word endings which indicate levels of respect. The tone and vocabulary tell us whether the speaker is being polite or casual. In academic writing, it is important to avoid slang such as *shoulda*, *gonna*, *yeah*, *dude*, or *buddy*. Many professors also dislike contractions such as *it’s*, *won’t*, or *shouldn’t* in writing. Generally, the only situation where it is acceptable to use vulgar language or obscenities is if you are quoting.

Avoiding Sexist Language

English keeps changing, and it has become current in the last twenty years to avoid sexism where possible. An example of sexism is *only* using male pronouns such as *he* and *his*. Here are a few strategies to use.

1. Alternating gender. *Any student who wants to join the workshop needs to leave his name. Any professor who needs the form should also leave her name.*
2. Using both: *Any employee using the bathroom should wash his or her hands.*
3. Switching everything to plural: *Students need to bring their books to class.*
4. Not using a pronoun at all. *It’s important to finish tax returns before April in order to avoid being charged a late fee.*

Some writers use *s/he* to mean both genders, but not everyone recognizes this usage, and others find it annoying. Choose among these styles, keeping in mind that your main objective in writing is to be clear. If in doubt, it’s a good idea to ask your professor. Also be aware that avoiding sexist pronouns doesn’t help if the content of your paper is sexist.