



Tone and Voice

In addition to explicitly making your claims and analysis in your essay paragraphs, you can also express your feelings towards a topic indirectly through the tone of your writing. This means that your audience gets a sense of how you feel about the topic of your writing from your word choices, ideas, and sentence structure. All of these factors contribute to the tone of your writing, which contributes to your individual voice as a writer. This handout breaks down the differences between tone and voice and why we need to pay careful attention to both in our writing.

Tone

Tone is the writer's attitude towards the topic and work. Tone is often fuelled by the writer's emotions towards the topic, which is why we need to pay attention to our tone and how it impacts our writing. We want our audiences to be interested in the ideas and interpretations expressed in our writing. But if a writer is not interested in the topic they are writing about, audiences may interpret the work as lazy or lacking enthusiasm, and become disinterested in what they have to say. Not only can this push your audience away, but it can make you sound unconfident in your work and lead to readers questioning your claims.

Example 1: "While I hoped to write on the duality of justice in Baillie's play, I will instead focus on her use of genre."

Example 2: "While the play is labeled a tragedy, audiences question why Baillie chose to use this genre until we focus on the supporting characters."

The sentence in Example 1 tells the audience that the writer is not interested in their topic, which makes readers wonder why the writer moved away from the initial topic. This style of writing sounds less confident as the reader will focus on the unknown and question your research and ideas.

Example 2, however, hides the writer's disappointment in the topic change and instead focuses on the new one. It focuses the reader on a clear topic without hinting at another research idea and confidently guides readers towards the central topic.

Focusing tone

Like all elements of writing, focusing your tone to show a confident attitude towards a work or topic takes practice. Yet there are ways to improve the tone of your writing. Below are some tips to remember when approaching a topic.

Find something about the topic that interests you.

Whether you choose the topic of your paper yourself, or are assigned a topic by an instructor, try to find something about the topic that interests you. This could be a point of support, a particular case study or source you can analyze, or a theme discussed in class. Enthusiasm for the topic will help you to create engaging writing that will draw your readers in.

Stay on topic

As tempting as it might be to wander to another topic, you want to keep your focus on a single, central topic so your reader does not get confused. If the topics support each other, use one as a supporting point, but don't try to force an off-topic argument to fit into your paper. You want to use the points and ideas that best support the topic and your thesis.

Choose clear and concise language

A clear tone uses language that your audience can easily understand. This involves being aware of your word choice and sentence structure. Avoid jargon and referencing complex concepts without providing definitions and explanation. Instead help your reader understand complicated terms and ideas by explaining what they mean and why they are important. This gives your reader context while also showing them that you have done your research.

Voice

Your voice is unique to you. Like the idiosyncrasies that make a person's speech patterns stand out, a person's writing voice is also unique to them. While providing your own original arguments and analysis in your papers should make your writing stand, your voice also helps make your writing distinct by making the sentences you create sound like you. Your unique voice is evident in how you propose, introduce, and analyze ideas, as you see them, in response to the topic.

Voice styles

While your voice as a writer will always be unique to you, there are different voice styles you will use in different situations. Just as you might speak differently to a boss than you would to a friend, depending on the type of assignment you are writing, you will need to use a particular style of voice. This builds off tone through your approach and style of approaching the topic. A formal essay, for example, will not have the same voice as a discussion post. Below are some different voice styles and explanations of their usage. If you are unsure of which voice to use in an assignment, reach out to your instructor to clarify, as each field will have different expectations for each type of voice.

Formal voice

You use a formal voice, also known as an academic voice, when writing research reports, research essays, or conference papers. This style avoids idioms and conversational jargon, instead using clear and formal vocabulary to create an authoritative and confident tone. While formal voice often uses complex sentence structure to create an in-depth understanding of a topic, it should still be easy to read aloud. This style varies from field to field, so check with your instructor if you are unsure about formal voice expectations in a particular discipline.

Reflective voice

When writing reflections and participating in discussions, you want to choose reflective voice to express your ideas. This style incorporates elements of formal voice to help you break down ideas and analyze them while allowing you to incorporate your own experience. One aspect of the reflective voice is the use of personal pronouns such as “I”. This locates you as the source of interpretation and places you in the conversation with your reader. Reflective voice blends different styles and lengths of sentences to add a narrative rhythm to the writing.

Casual voice

Casual voice arises most commonly when speaking or in informal written communications such as texts or emails. While we rarely use this voice in academic writing, we can use it to help us brainstorm ideas when outlining assignments. The benefit of a casual voice is that it creates an approachable voice style. For this reason, you may notice instructors using casual voice when conveying information in lectures. However the informal nature of casual voice can lead to the use of colloquial slang that does not help an argument or claim in an essay.

Active vs. Passive Voice

Active and passive voice differ from the voice styles above as they can be used in any of the voice styles, and impact the tone of your writing.

Active voice

Active voice is created by making the doer of the action the subject of the sentence or verb. That is to say, when writing in the active voice, the subject of the sentence performs the action of the sentence. The active voice makes your writing more clear, concise, and lively. Most

disciplines, outside of the sciences, prefer the use of active voice to clarify ideas and keep analysis central. Sentence written in active voice are also more concise as they use fewer words to express the action.

Passive voice

Passive voice is created by making the subject of the sentence or verb the recipient of the action. That is to say, when writing in the passive voice the object of the action (i.e. the thing that is acted upon) is the subject of the sentence. While passive voice is most common in the hard sciences, there are instances where it may be appropriate to use passive voice when writing in other disciplines. Use passive voice when you don't want to focus on the subject of the action, or when you want to highlight the object the action. This voice style places the object before the verb to focus on the object rather than the subject. Passive voice creates a weaker or more subtle tone to writing, so it can be useful if you wish to be cautious about what you are saying.

The following examples show the difference between passive and active voice.

Examples:

Active voice: "We **reviewed** the client's file and **determined** that he was eligible for benefits."

Passive voice: "The client's file **was reviewed** and a determination **was made** about eligibility for benefits."

Conclusion: Remember, your voice is your own

Your voice should reflect your own personality and style, no matter the assignment, meaning you still should sound like yourself if you read the work aloud. Not everyone will write the same way in each style. While it is important to make efforts to adapt your writing to different voices and tones, it is also important to write in a way that is authentic to you. This prevents your writing from sounding forced and lets the reader know who you are as a writer and how you perceive the topic.