

ADVICE ON ACADEMIC TONE

"Academic Tone" is the phrase used to describe the voice and academic personality used by college-level writers. This voice is distinguished from the personal voice by its emphasis on factors that befit college-level essays: relative objectivity, precision and conservative usage. All three of these factors are determined by the needs and expectations of an academic audience, which includes professors, academic peers and other colleagues. However, diction of greater sophistication, complex and compound-complex sentence structure, as well as controlled use of rhetorical appeal will identify a quality of voice that runs alongside the quality of content. In upper division and graduate classes, dexterity in the use of academic tone is essential.

QUICK REFERENCE

The forbidden words of college writing and academic tone:

NOUN	PRONOUN	VERB	ADJECTIVE	ADVERB
thing	you	get	great	hopefully

e.g.

The great thing about getting a college degree is that, hopefully, it will help you get a great job.

revise as follows:

One hopes that obtaining a college degree will lead to gainful and rewarding employment.

Pronouns

The debate over what pronouns writers can use to introduce and discuss their ideas has long since vexed students and teachers alike. The issue is really whether or not to include references to the writer and to the reader in the discussion. Although it is not strictly forbidden to use the pronoun "I" in one's prose—for there may, indeed, be occasion when the writer needs to include herself in describing relevant personal experience—it is usually unnecessary, since it produces a voice uncertain about its own ideas and in need of qualifying its statements as personal observation. Using the pronoun "you", on the other hand, makes a writer guilty of over-familiarity, since the second person pronoun is a prominent feature of everyday, informal discourse. The pronoun "we", when overused, can convey a supercilious or condescending tone; the pronoun "one", when overused, can torture sentences in unnecessarily passive constructions and make for a conspicuously clinical tone. The key to pronouns in academic prose is in using them consistently and in moderation, or to write your prose without any use of such pronouns at all.

Well meaning attempts to avoid sexism when pronouns need not be gender-specific have created a number of clumsy, intrusive solutions to deal with this shortcoming of the English language: *e.g.*, "s/he"; "his/hers"; "him or her"; "she or he"; "they". In addition to disturbing the style and character of academic prose, these awkward solutions occasionally make for real syntactical problems and problems of agreement: *e.g.*, "One should strive to appreciate the historical contexts of the books they are reading." Although writers try to rely on the plural pronouns to help them, this is not a perfect solution either. Perhaps the best way to solve this dilemma is to vary throughout the prose the gender of those pronouns that are not gender-specific, but be consistent to one gender within the sentence. In cases where the gender of the speaker or narrator in a work of literature is unknown and cannot be ascertained from context, use the gender of the author.

NOT ALLOWED	agreement issues: singular antecedent with they/their, and so forth	second person pronoun: you, your, you're, you've, you'll, yours
	slash pronouns: he/she, his/her, him/her, s/he, and so forth	unorthodox reflexive and intensive pronouns: themselves; themselves; ourselves

PERMITTED SPARINGLY	choice of pronoun: he or she, his or her, him or her, his or hers genderless pronouns: "one" and "one's" appropriate use of passive voice	first person plural pronouns: we, our, us first person singular pronouns: I, me, my, mine
COMMONLY PERMITTED	agreement issues: plural antecedent with they/their and so forth; singular antecedent with he, her, its and so forth	third person pronouns: he, she, it, one indefinite pronouns: some, all, many, none, few, and so forth

e.g.

The largest single group in this country to suffer the greatest increase in abuses and hate crimes is the disabled. A sight impaired person, for example, has a 45% chance—greater than any other group—of having theirself robbed or in a public place. You even see an increase in more violent and invasive types of crime perpetrated against the handicapped, such as rape and assault with weapons. Unlike members of other groups for which a consciousness about hate crimes has been raised in recent years, the average disabled individual feels that s/he is even less protected by his/her city and government authorities than they did just twenty-five years ago. Perhaps one needs to make oneself more proactively responsible for the rights of the disabled in one's community so that one may not some day fall victim, oneself, to the injustices that now befall your average handicapped neighbor. You never know.

Diction and Usage

A vocabulary companionable to academic prose should avoid the appearance of taking linguistic, rhetorical or discursive shortcuts.

Linguistic Shortcuts

When using terms that are commonly referenced by their abbreviations, introduce the full term the first time, followed immediately by the abbreviation in parentheses; you may then substitute the abbreviation each time thereafter: e.g., Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (A.I.D.S.). Try, however, to avoid using abbreviations which are more appropriate to note-taking, such as "etc.", "&" "w/o" "@" and other similar substitutions for commonly used words in expository prose. Good academic writing should not be in shorthand.

	ABBREVIATIONS	SYMBOLS•	CONTRIVED SPELLINGS
NOT PERMITTED	etc.; yr.-old; wk. min.; univ./U.; Jan.; w/o; a.s.a.p.; p.o.v.	@; +; &; =; %; 8^X; ;^(2good4U; thru; tonite; delite CU l8r, LOL, IMHO
PERMITTED*	U.S.A.; m.p.h.; C.O.D.; F.C.C.; C.I.A.; T.W.A.	°F; °C; \$; £; ¢	

*Be sure to consider whether or not your formal audience will understand the meaning of these abbreviations or symbols. If there is any doubt, follow the first use of such an abbreviation with the full word or meaning in parentheses; for example: F.B.I. (Federal Bureau of Investigation).

•If these symbols are used in their proper context, and not lazily substituted for words, they may be permitted. If you have any doubt, check with your instructor.

Rhetorical Shortcuts

Communicating one's integrity as the voice of the writing is a delicate matter. The most common way writers falter in this regard is to confuse commanding the audience's respect with winning the audience's friendship. Of the many ways to do this, a casual speaking voice in one's academic writing is the surest way to alienate readers; it implies that the writer's personality and ego are more highly prized than the subject of his writing. Furthermore, in resorting to a voice apropos of a casual milieu, the writer may believe he is gaining the reader's trust by bridging their formal

distance with the familiar territory of conversational English. However, readers, perceiving an unctuous and passively aggressive attempt to win their confidence instead of gaining their intellectual trust, become distrustful of the writer's motives. (Imagine, for example, the effect of this strategy when deployed by used car salesmen.) Avoid, therefore, contractions or any usage which forces the audience into such overtly familiar relationship; remember, readers *want* your objective distance from the topic, even if in appearance only.

Discursive Shortcuts

One should at all times avoid the shorthand of colloquialisms, slang, clichés and all other turns of phrases. Not only do these overtly interfere with the impression of objectivity in the writing (except where an intentional effect is desired), they risk alienating readers who are less capable of understanding their idiomatic meaning--either because they are not native speakers of English, or because their own regional or generational vernacular does not contain this idiomatic usage. That is to say, even though writers often defend subjective positions with regard to interpretation and exegesis, their voices try to maintain reason, clarity and objectivity. Try to ingratiate yourself to the members of your academic audience by using the lexicon that acknowledges what they know about the subject and in what manner they are comfortable discussing it.

CLICHES	hopefully, so to speak, needless to say, all in all, pig in a poke, on a wing and a prayer, hope beyond hope, in society today, in conclusion, since time immemorial, since the beginning of time, blue in the face, etcetera, etcetera, etcetera
COMBINATIVE VERBS	going down; phoning up; going out; looking up; starting out; finishing up; hooking up; stressing out; bearing down; opening up; checking in; following through; slipping under; run across
CONTRACTIONS	can't, won't, isn't, wasn't, didn't, don't, couldn't, wouldn't, shouldn't, would've, could've, should've, mustn't, they'll, I'm, it's, she's, he's, you'll
HYPERBOLE	awesome, biggest, greatest, definitely, absolutely, positively, impossibly, unbelievably, undeniably, super, really, extraordinary, fabulous, incredibly, certainly, very, extremely, it is amazing that
IMPRECISION	thing, got, got to, get, get to, going to; have to; kind of
INTIMATE or PERSONAL USAGE	kids, kiddies, moms, dads, rehab, okay, alot (a lot), alright (all right), folks, solo, cops
SLANG and VULGARISMS	cool; neat; great; crappy; piss-poor; sucked in; tap that ass; whack; chill out; phat; freaky-deaky; down with that; etc.
UNNECESSARY PASSIVE VOICE	there is, there are; what we must do is; the reason is because; it is for this reason; it is because of; has been happening; getting fired; getting married

e.g.

In society today, there are a lot of different kinds of people. Not any other country in the world today has got so many different kinds of races, nationalities and ethnicity groups. But even though the U.S. has been a really big asylum for different kinds of peoples, it hasn't always been such a great refuge for diversified cultures. Our great country has opened its doors to tons of nationalities, but often their cultures aren't getting encouraged to survive. It's amazing to think that we pride ourself in these things that make our country a place of freedom, but we must of forgotten some of the more basic principles of freedom 'cause so many new immigrants have to endure the pressures of a bland and uniform culture that kind of forces their own to take a back seat. This is not alright and is incredibly insensitive. Hopefully we can prioritize this and make a change for the better in the new millennium.

e.g.

Abstinence is a great goal for most sex ed programs in the U. S.; eighty-six % of the sex ed teachers responding to the Guttmacher Institute survey are saying they taught their kids 14 yrs. or older that abstinence is the best way not to get pregnant and w/o sexually transmissible diseases. Most of the teachers are saying they tried to help their kids not do intercourse by giving instruction on how to back off from peer pressure and how to say they won't have sex with a boyfriend or girlfriend, etc.

Cultural and Political Neutrality

In the early 1980s, "political correctness" simply meant that one was expressing sensitivity for the political identities forged by minority groups, and demonstrating profound respect for the hard-won battles they had fought (and continue to fight) to earn the right to assert those identities. By the 1990s, an "attitude" of political correctness gave way to the "practice" of political correctness, and criticism against the extreme, sometimes ridiculous behaviors that arose because of the "political correctness" bandwagon has now made "politically *incorrect*" even more popular a term than that catch phrase that gave rise to it.

Criticism of political correctness, however, can be as propagandistic in its political agendas and seeks in some cases to dismantle the rights earned by minority groups and women. As a result, danger now exists in our assumption that all politically correct behavior is extremist, or that "correctness" is entirely a matter of following popular or unpopular rules of behavior rather than espousing a tolerant and sensitive attitude. Gender-neutral terminology for occupations is an apt example of the problem. Whether or not the specific gender of a referenced individual is known, it is, both, politically correct *and* ideologically appropriate to choose an occupation title that is not gender-specific. Why? Because equality of the sexes--our motivation for *wanting* to be correct--continues to be a worthy aim. In academic writing especially, we must be vigilant that our skepticism about political correctness not suddenly permit us to be disrespectful and intolerant of our readers' socio-political, cultural and sexual differences. By representing your readers' diversity in the careful and *correctly* chosen terminology of your writing, you can establish a neutral relationship with them concerning those issues that may be unrelated to your topic. By not appearing culturally or politically biased in your writing, you will avoid an equally irrelevant bias in reaction, and your arguments will be permitted to succeed on their own intellectual merits.

AVOID PRESUMPTIONS	not everyone in your audience is White not everyone in your audience is Christian; not all of your readers are religious not all of your readers are heterosexual not everyone shares your politics or appreciation for popular culture not everyone to whom you appeal speaks English as a first language your readers are not necessarily the same age as you			
	AVOID	PREFERRED	AVOID	PREFERRED
	mankind	humanity; humankind	Judeo-Christianity	Judaism and Christianity
	fireman	firefighter	America	United States
	mailman	postal carrier	Indian; Eskimo	Native American; Inuit
	actress	actor	squaw	Native American woman
	congressman	congressperson	Oriental, African, South American	[use a specific nationality]
	housewife	housekeeper	B.C. and A.D.	B.C.E. (Before the Common Era) and C.E.
	DO NOT PRESUME THESE ARE ALWAYS JUST ONE GENDER		doctor, lawyer, professor, president, vice-president, C.E.O., broker, chef, nurse, assistant, teacher, secretary, cook, beautician, homemaker	

e.g.

God created the world in six days, but now the planet has been taken over by men as if we owned it. The average politician might refer to this exploitation of the planetary resources as “progress,” but he, and so many others who reap the greatest monetary benefits from the destruction of forests and other rarified environments, does not speak for the majority of concerned world citizens. “All you need is love,” so the song goes, but the kind of love we show the planet now, in a very serious manner, reflects the kind of regard we hold for our own species. And we must wear our hearts on our sleeves these days for anyone to take notice of our environmental message. Over the next thirty years, humans will directly cause the extinction of a hundred species per day; eventually, we will be one of those species. Clearly, our stewardship of our planet will ensure our very survival, an important concept we as parents must pass on to our sons and daughters.

Names, Titles and Essay Titles

When referring to authors, it is customary in academic prose to introduce them for the first time by their full names and, in the case of scholarly writers, by their authority or background. After the initial introduction of a full name, reference by last name is acceptable. Likewise, the full titles of works with long titles should be introduced first, then referenced afterward by a prudent abbreviation (e.g., first, “Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman: Certain Private Conversation in Two Acts and a Requiem*,” then “Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*”). Like the tone of your essay’s prose, the title of your essay should reflect sensitivity to your audience. Regardless of how informal some aspects of the essay may be, there is a need to inform academic readers clearly about the content of the essay by way of its title. Make sure that the title of your essay communicates the essay’s topic or intent, if not in a primary way (e.g., “Isolation as a Human Invention in Franz Kafka’s ‘The Metamorphosis’”), then in a secondary title (e.g., “The Insect Under the Sofa: Isolation as a Human Invention in Franz Kafka’s ‘The Metamorphosis’”). Know when levity or obfuscation are inappropriate, so as not to offend your readers (e.g., “Getting Bugged by Humanity: Gregor as Dung Beetle in Franz Kafka’s ‘The Metamorphosis’”).

DISRESPECTFUL REFERENCES	If author’s name is, for example, Helen Gardner, and she is Doctor of Philosophy in Literature, then	NOT Helen or Dr. Helen	BUT RATHER Dr. Helen Gardner <i>or</i> Dr. Gardner <i>or simply</i> Gardner
INAPPROPRIATE SHORTENING OF TITLES	If the title is Joseph Campbell’s “Transformation Of the Hero: 8. <i>Departure Of the Hero.</i> ”	NOT “Transformation” or “Transformation of Hero”	BUT RATHER Campbell’s “Transformation Of the Hero”
GLIB OR FLIPPANT TITLES	If you are titling your own essay that analyzes Franz Kafka’s “The Metamorphosis,” then	NOT “Getting Bugged by Humanity: Gregor as Dung Beetle in Franz Kafka’s ‘The Metamorphosis’” <i>or</i> “Pass the Roach: Kafka’s Secret Pet”	BUT RATHER “Isolation as a Human Invention in Franz Kafka’s ‘The Metamorphosis’” <i>or</i> “The Insect Under the Sofa: Isolation as a Human Invention in Franz Kafka’s ‘The Metamorphosis’”