Help With: Maintaining 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 of the author and is not appropriate for university-level writing. This is partly because slang changes quickly and can confuse future readers of your writing, 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 to avoid include:

- He drives me crazy.
- All’s well that ends well.
- The early bird catches the worm.
- You can’t have your cake and eat it too.
- Every cloud has its silver lining.
- One of the biggest problems America faces today is…
- ...the best piece of literature ever written.
- She just added fuel to the fire.
- I was the happiest person in the world.
- I was his biggest fan.

**Avoiding Casual or Slang Language**

Unlike many 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 words such as shoulda, gonna, yeah, dude, or buddy. Many professors do not consider contractions such as it’s, won’t, or shouldn’t to be proper academic style. 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 in academic writing. 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 what this usage means, and others find it tiring on the eyes. Choose among these styles, keeping in mind that your objective above everything else 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 you if the content of your paper is sexist.