Academic Tone for Formal Writing

Throughout your time at Antioch you will be writing in many different styles. For more formal assignments the audience usually expects an academic tone. If you are not sure about your instructor's expectations, you should ask what type of tone they would like you to use. (Reflection essays can often have a more casual or creative tone, but not always.)

What does an academic tone sound like?
- Formal rather than conversational phrases
- Precise wording and specific facts (rather than generalizations)
- Limited use of words that sound opinionated, emotional, or flowery

One strategy for approaching more formal writing assignments is to write as you usually would, and then look for words and phrases to replace.

1. Avoid Conversational Words & Phrases

Avoid	kind of, sort of, totally
actually, basically, literally, seriously	things, something, anything, stuff
for sure, of course, clearly, obviously	now, well, to be honest, honestly, to be fair
really, very, super	a lot, a bunch, a little, a ton

Writing Tips:
- **Replace conversational transitions** (*actually, basically, literally*) with more formal transitions like *in fact, in essence, essentially*
- **Replace imprecise amounts** (*a bunch, a little, lots, a ton*) with more descriptive phrases such as *many, few, several, a significant number of, the majority of, not many*

Since academic writing values research you may even want to try to find specific statistics to include: *X%, more than X%, nearly X# of* … (don't forget to cite sources for specific numbers)
- **Replace imprecise qualifiers** (*kind of, sort of, totally, for sure*) with more academic phrases like *in part, partially, somewhat, in most cases*

2. Avoid the Language of Public Speaking

Avoid	"Let me explain"	First, we will consider…"
"Let us …"	"Now, we can see"	"As I previously mentioned"
"We can all agree that …"	"As we have seen"	"My last point is …"

Certain phrases are often associated with public speaking. Using these phrases in academic writing could be distracting to your reader.
Writing Tip:
- **Replace phrases used in public speaking to preview/recap ideas** (*"as I previously mentioned"*) with more academic signposting like *"the previous section explored"* or *"This essay will address three main questions:"*
  Note: signposting is not necessary (or beneficial) for short essays, but is often used in longer papers.

3. Avoid Generalizations & Clichés

Avoid	"Throughout history…"
"X are humans too" (ex. Prisoners are humans too)	"Since the beginning of time"
"We have all hit rock bottom/faced struggles"	"It is just a matter of time until …"
"Future generations are depending on us for …"	

Generalizations can weaken your paper because they tend to be too broad and imprecise. Whenever you can, replace them with more specific statements or research findings from scholarly sources.

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4. Avoid Writing "you"

Avoid	
You should/should not …	You might assume/believe/think …

Certain genres use "you" to create a casual, conversational tone. If you are writing a blog or self-help article this works well. However, for a formal assignment, you should avoid directly addressing the reader.

Writing Tip:

- **Replace "you"** with the specific group that you have in mind (teenagers, Americans, many adolescents), or write "people."

5. Avoid Words that Express Value Judgments

Avoid	
immoral, wrong, bad	insane, crazy
good	ridiculous, horrible, terrible

Words that express value judgments are typically avoided when writing academic papers (and when using APA style in general). Using too many of these words can create a tone that sounds emotional or opinionated. You may want to replace these types of words with words that are more specific.

Writing Tips:

- **Replace "bad"** (which could mean so many things) with a specific word like *dangerous, harmful, shortsighted, problematic, inadequate, questionable, imprudent, destructive, wasteful, defective, hasty,* or *incomplete, insufficient*
- **Replace "wrong/immoral"** with a word that is less of a value judgment like *unethical, unfair, irresponsible, corrupt, unprincipled, fraudulent, unscrupulous, dishonest, inappropriate, indecent, improper, prejudicial,* or *corrosive*
- **Replace "crazy/insane"** (which is considered offensive because it trivializes mental illness) with a word like *surprising, unwarranted, unjustified, extreme, offensive, harsh, severe, distressing, insipid,* or *irrational*

6. Avoid Informal (flowery) Adjectives

Avoid		
amazing, fascinating, wondrous, wonderful,	glorious, fantastic, fabulous, cool, magnificent,	shocking, unbelievable, incredible

Informal adjectives and flowery adjectives can make your tone sound too casual. Try to minimize these for more formal writing assignments.