

Voice, Style and Tone

Writing in active or passive voice contributes to the tone and style of your writing, but is not the only determining factor. When you are considering your voice, tone and style, think about the needs of your audience as well as your purpose in writing.

Your audience. Your readers will have certain expectations based on the type of document you have written. You might make the same argument in three documents: a research paper, an email, and a conference presentation. Each time, even though you're conveying the same message, you'll need to adjust your voice, style and tone to meet your audience's expectations. Your job as a writer is to make it as easy as possible for your readers to understand your ideas.

You. Even though you are writing for an audience, you (as the writer) get to choose what you say. You may be writing on an assigned topic or completing an assigned task, but you are still in control of the words you put on the page. Be thoughtful and intentional about your language and your word choice, writing in a tone and style that is comfortable for you. Remember that even academic or formal styles can feel comfortable—you don't need to be conversational to be comfortable.

Questions to ask yourself as you write and revise:

- Are my paragraphs clear and cohesive? (Do I discuss and elaborate on only one main idea per paragraph? Or do my paragraphs contain too many ideas? [More than one idea = too many ideas.]
- Do I use transitions effectively? (Do I help my reader move from one idea to another, so that my writing seems to “flow”?)
- Are my sentences overly long or complex? Can I restate my ideas so that they are simpler to understand? Can I simplify my language without oversimplifying my ideas?
- Does the length and rhythm of my sentences vary? (Do I begin my sentences in a variety of ways, or do I use the same opening phrases over and over?)
- Do I introduce sources in various ways, or are my introductions repetitive?
- Will my audience understand and accept the jargon I use? (Am I using language that is acceptable in this discipline?)
- Is my language too technical for my audience? Is it technical enough? (How much does my audience know about my topic? Will they understand specialized terms?)
- Will my readers find my words too stiff and formal? Or too casual? (Does my tone match the occasion in which I'm writing?)
- Is my tone consistent? (Is my language casual in some places but formal in others?)