Language, Tone, and Audience

Whether we realize it or not, whenever we write or talk, we all use *language*, *tone*, and pay attention to our *audience*. We adjust our behavior, speech, and actions depending upon who we are speaking to or writing for (our audience). For example, we don't use the same language, nor do we speak in the same tone, when we talk to our friends as we do with our grandparents. Similarly, if we speak to our parents disrespectfully, they might respond by saying, "Don't use that tone with me!" When writing, the words we choose create the tone and convey to the reader that we are being conversational, formal, sarcastic, or even humorous. *Language, tone,* and *audience* significantly affect how we communicate our ideas in our writing.

LANGUAGE

This is how you say what you want to say, or the words a writer chooses to clearly and effectively express ideas or to evoke a particular mood. Developing a rich and extensive vocabulary will enable you to create variety in your writing.

Colloquial Language

Colloquial language is used in informal writing situations and creates a conversational tone. Everyday spoken language gives your writing a casual, relaxed effect. Colloquial language is not necessarily "wrong," but it is used when a writer is trying to achieve informality. Some college writing assignments may require writers to use colloquial language, but most require a formal tone that is discipline-specific.

Informal: Some adults *haven't got a clue about* what is important to the younger generation.

Formal: Adults *may not be aware of* what is important to the younger generation.

Informal: I *don't* want my *kid* sister *tagging along with* my friends and me.

Formal: I *do not* want my *younger* sister *accompanying* my friends and me.

Sexist and Racist Language

Just as you proofread your work for grammatical errors and fluidity and clarity of expression, you should also reread your compositions for bias. Language can often reflect harmful prejudices that people have toward others on the basis of gender, sexual orientation, ethnic group, disability, or even age. This would be inappropriate to use in either writing or speaking.

Sexist language can be patronizing:

Example: *Ladies* are increasingly entering professions previously closed to them.

Revised: *Women* are increasingly entering professions previously closed to them.

Sexist language can create stereotypes:

>   Example: The considerate doctor commends a nurse when *she* provides *his* patients with good care.
>
>   Revised: Considerate doctors commend nurses when *they* provide *patients* with good care.

Sexist language makes gender-specific generalizations:

>   Example: *Man* has not reached his full technological potential.
>
>   Revised: *Humans* have not yet reached their full technological potential.

Sexist language can exclude genders:

>   Example: *Freshmen* are expected to pass their college's entrance exams.
>
>   Revised: *First-year college students* are expected to pass their entrance exams.
>
>   Example: A *student* who works hard is more likely to receive a higher grade on *his* assignment.
>
>   Revised: A *student* who works hard is more likely to receive a higher grade on *an* assignment.

Abstract and Concrete Language

Abstract words name qualities and ideas. For example: *beauty, love, liberty, freedom, independence, and obscenity.* Abstract words may evoke different meanings based on an individual's subjective interpretation of the words. Instead, use more precise language to convey your exact meaning.

>   Example: On her vacation, Nancy had *beautiful* weather at the beach.
>
>   Revised: On her vacation, Nancy enjoyed *the powder-blue sky dotted with puffy, white clouds and the sun sparkling on the azure* ocean water.

Concrete or specific words identify what writers and audiences know based on the five senses: sound, sight, smell, touch, and taste. Words such as bitter, salty, screeching, humming, slick, sharp, foggy, and prickly are examples of specific language.

>   Example: Sandy's dress was green.
>
>   Revised: Sandy's short dress was the color of lime-green Jell-O, and it shimmered in the sunlight.

TONE

In writing, *tone* is created by the language authors choose to use with the intention of presenting the piece of writing to a particular audience. It creates attitude. Tone can range from sarcastic to humorous, from serious to informal, or from questioning to persuasive or informational. When we are writing, we can't rely on body language and tone of voice to infer meaning; rather, we have to convey our meaning by choosing the specific words so that readers will understand our intent and intonation without the aid of our speaking voice. Writers choose language to create tone depending on the purpose and the point they want to convey or emphasize.

Insincere: I am sorry you had to wait, but the doctor was busy, and it couldn't be helped.

Sincere: I am sorry you had to wait, but the doctor had an emergency. I appreciate your patience.

Derogatory: When Miranda walked in, I chuckled and said, "Did your hairstylist use hedge trimmers to cut your hair?"

Sincere: When Miranda walked in, I did a double take and exclaimed, "Wow! I love your new haircut!"

Questions can often help writers and readers discover the *tone* in writing:

- Does the writer use slang or colloquial language? Is the tone conversational, formal or informal?

- Does the writer use jargon directed toward a specialized audience? Does the writer use discipline-specific language? Is the writing academic or technical, or intended for a specific field?

- What specific words does the writer use to create the tone?

- Is the writer evoking a specific reaction or emotion from an audience through the use of tone?

When writers define the purpose and goals of their writing, they should pay attention to the tone they want to create to achieve the most effective results. The tone affects the writer's *style* and distinctive *voice*. When readers examine a piece of writing, they should try to determine the tone to better understand the writer's *purpose* for writing and the *audience* the writer intends to reach.

AUDIENCE

Writers produce their most effective writing when it is directed at a specific *audience*. When writers have an audience in mind or know their audience's characteristics well, they relay ideas by using language and tone that their intended readers will appreciate and understand. For example, when writing for a group of people in the computer industry, technical language and jargon related to that field can be used without confusing the audience. Also, writing for a specific audience allows the writer to make definite appeals to the emotions, logic, and ethics of

the audience; appeals to these three areas are especially effective in persuasive writing. In order for appeals to be effective, writers should know their audience's values, beliefs, opinions, knowledge, and interests. If the audience belongs to a specific group, sometimes writers can make assumptions about prior knowledge.

Questions can help writers understand their *audience*:

- What is the composition of my audience? Characteristics? Demographics?

- Will they understand the language that I am using?

- What beliefs, values, and logical ideas do members of my audience subscribe to?

- Will my audience appreciate the particular tone I am using to persuade or inform them about an issue?