

Lesson Name : 4

Lesson Title : Tone, Language, and Voice

Course Name : English 2 Part 2 [Honors]

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Essential Instruction



This lesson will help you understand the difference between tone of voice and the tone of your writing.

Tone, language, and voice are integral parts of the writing process. You want to pay close attention to these three related areas when you are writing.

Tone

We often think of tone in terms of “tone of voice.” We can have humorous tones, serious tones, respectful tones, angry tones, sarcastic tones, and so on. Another familiar use of the word *tone* is in relation to literature. Tone as a literary element relates to the emotion the author is trying to inspire in the reader. In formal writing, the tone of your work should be serious, academic, and formal.

We use four types of language and each of these types gives speech and writing a different tone.

Slang is language used with your friends and close family members. Slang is often generational, meaning different age groups use different slang. For example, teenagers in the 1960s might have termed music they liked as *groovy*. Using that word today, however, would mark you as hopelessly out of date, because slang is always changing. Among teenagers today, text message language such as “noob” meaning a person new to a community, usually in terms of gaming, or an acronym like “imho” to stand for “in my humble opinion.” Another type of slang is words and phrases that are considered swear or curse words, or are in some way offensive. Slang is never appropriate in formal writing.

Colloquial Language is centered in a geographic area. For instance, the word “grill” is used in the Midwestern area of the United States to mean to cook meat over an open flame (using gas, wood or charcoal). In the western area of the U.S. “grill” isn’t used. Instead they say “barbeque”. In Australia, they use the word “barbie”. “Grill”, “barbeque” and “barbie” mean the same thing in different areas. Colloquial language is appropriate in informal writing and situations but should be avoided in formal writing and situations, particularly in those cases when your listeners or readers are from a different area.

Informal Language is acceptable with family and friends, and even in informal situations at school or work. It generally combines slang, colloquialisms, and standard language. However, specialized slang and offensive language are avoided. Informal language often uses shortened forms (such as wheels for car) and contractions, with which most people are familiar.

You might use informal language in an email to a teacher or a boss, but it should not be used in formal writing situations.

Formal Language is for bosses, “higher ups”, and people you want to impress. You should use formal language in situations where manners are important. When writing, you should use formal language in all assignments. Formal language uses appropriate word choice and syntax as well as excellent grammar and mechanics. This gives your writing a formal, serious, and academic tone.

Another type of language is called **jargon**. Jargon refers to the words and phrases common to specific occupations or professions. Health care professionals are often requested to get things “stat,” which means “quickly,” while police officers and fire fighters might call for a “bus” when they need an ambulance sent out. Jargon can be appropriate when communicating with others in that community but it is never appropriate to use in formal writing nor is it appropriate to use it when others might not understand.

In addition to the type of language, **diction** is also important. Diction means “word choice” and attention to word choice is an important part of writing. You want to choose words that are appropriate to the subject. Do not use words if you are unfamiliar with or unsure of their meanings. You also want to be aware of a word’s connotations, that is, the associations it has beyond its dictionary definition. For example, the words “scrawny” and “slender” both have similar meanings, but scrawny has a negative connotation, whereas slender has a positive connotation.

Another important issue with word choice are frequently confused or misused words.

Word groups such as “they’re/their/there,” “your/you’re,” and “its/it’s” can cause problems with language. It is important to understand completely a word’s definition. If you are even slightly unsure of a word’s exact meaning be sure to look it up before using it.

Syntax

Syntax is just as important as diction. Syntax is the way you arrange words in a sentence. Generally, we learn correct syntax as children when we are learning to speak. There are slight differences between formal syntax and informal syntax. For example, we generally end sentences with prepositions in casual situations. This is inappropriate in formal writing however.

Voice

Voice is related to syntax. There are two types of voice, active and passive. Sentences written in active voice have the subject of the sentence perform the action:

John ordered the pizza.

Sentences written in passive voice, on the other hand, have the subject of the action receive the action:

The pizza was ordered by John.

Generally, in formal writing you want to strive to have most of your sentences in the active voice. The passive voice is not necessarily wrong however and can be appropriate in certain situations. For example, when the subject performing the action is unknown or unimportant, the passive voice is both appropriate and necessary:

The pyramids were designed to be tombs for Egyptian royalty.