



Essay tone

The tone of an essay in an academic context should be formal, impersonal, technical, and abstract. We can plot these dimensions for an essay as follows:



Formal

Being formal doesn't necessarily mean being complicated or hard to read, but you do need to take care with your word choice and expression.

To make your language sound as formal as possible, you should avoid using language features that are characteristic of spoken casual conversation, such as:

- colloquial or slang words (e.g. use 'children' instead of 'kids')
- contractions (e.g. use 'is not' instead of 'isn't')
- abbreviations (e.g. use the word 'maximum' instead of 'max')
- spoken-like grammatical structures such as run-on sentences or sentence fragments

Impersonal

Even though your essay is *your* argument, it's not appropriate to present it as your personal opinion. You have to express it in an objective way for the academic context. This means presenting ideas directly as claims that are supported by evidence.

In general, you should avoid referring to yourself and your reader directly using the pronouns 'I', 'me', and 'you'. Although some academics allow you to use personal pronouns, you should be cautious about using them and aim for a more impersonal tone. The thing that is at stake in your essay is your ideas, not you or your reader's personal identity, so your sentences should be oriented to the claims you are making.

For example, you may feel tempted to say something like 'I believe...' or 'I think...' to introduce an idea or claim. But in this context you can just present the idea as it is. The reader will know it's your idea if it's not attributed to any other source. For example:

'I believe that adults should restrict their mobile phone use at night because, as Exelmans and Van den Bulck's (2016) research shows, mobile phone use after lights out can adversely affect sleep and increase fatigue.'

becomes:

'Adults should restrict their mobile phone use at night because, as Exelmans and Van den Bulck's (2016) research shows, mobile phone use after lights out can adversely affect sleep and increase fatigue.'

Your claim: *that adults should restrict their mobile phone use before bedtime*

Your evidence: *research that links mobile phone after lights out to sleep problems (Exelmans & Van den Bulck, 2016)*

Technical

You're writing your essay about a specific topic in a specific academic discipline, so you should use technical terms associated with that topic and that discipline. This shows that you're developing an understanding of the special categories and terminology used in your discipline. It also helps you to communicate more precisely about the particular discipline-specific concepts that are important in your argument.

Tips for learning to use the technical terms of your discipline:

- When you read your course readings, highlight terms that are not familiar to you. Do they seem to be specific to the discipline? Or are they just new words for you? You can check this by reading other sources in the same discipline, using the [Library Search Box](#), or asking your tutor or fellow students.
- Note down key terms from your lectures and tutorials.
- Keep a glossary of the new terms you are learning.
- Take note of how scholars in your discipline use the terms, e.g. do they define the term for the reader or do they assume the reader knows what it means? Do they format it in a special way, e.g. using a capital letter(s) or an acronym? Do they contrast the term with other terms that have a similar meaning to clarify its scope?

Abstract

You're presenting an argument about ideas rather than concrete things. Your argument may have a practical impact on the real world, but you still need to present the argument in abstract, conceptual terms.

The nouns you use should mostly be abstract nouns: qualities and concepts, things that you can't see or touch, e.g. sustainability, economic growth, anxiety, motivation, design. Many of these are related to verbs (e.g. growth comes from the verb 'grow', 'motivation' comes from the verb 'motivate'). You can find out more in YourDictionary's article on [Abstract Nouns](#).

References

Exelmans, L. & Van den Bulck, J. (2016). Bedtime mobile phone use and sleep in adults. *Social Science & Medicine*, 148, 93-101.