

Audience, Purpose, and Tone

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Students in my writing classes often ask me general questions about academic writing: How long should a research paper be? How many sources should a term paper cite? How much background information should be included in an analysis? The most common answer that I give them is, “It depends.” This answer does not make me popular with students, but it is the truest answer I can give. Some papers are long and some are short; some papers cite dozens of sources, but some only cite a few. Three of the most important factors affecting these answers – things that it depends on – are audience, purpose, and tone. Before you start to write any academic paper, you should think about your audience, your purpose, and your tone.

“Audience” means the people who will read your paper. Some academic writing, such as a term paper or a thesis, is written for an instructor or a committee of professors. More commonly, a paper is written for colleagues in your field, other people who study some of the same things you do. Sometimes academic writing is addressed to an audience outside your field, as when you write a grant proposal that will be read by an interdisciplinary committee. In every case, thinking about who will read the paper changes what you write and how you write it.

Ask yourself some questions about your audience. Who will read this paper? How much do they already know about the topic, and what do you need to tell them? Why will your audience read what you write, and can you make them want to keep reading? How are they likely to react to what you are saying? For example, are you expanding an ongoing body of research, filling in a known gap in current understanding, or challenging accepted ideas? Also, what style of writing is your audience used to? Are there accepted patterns for you to follow, or a general tone that writing in your field follows? The answers to each of these questions will affect both the content and the form of your writing.

“Purpose” means why you are writing, and what effect you hope to have. The most common purpose in academic writing is to *explain* some idea or research finding and to *persuade* readers that your explanation or theory is the correct one. In doing so, you may need to *describe* an object, place, or activity. Sometimes you might write to *narrate* set of events, in the manner of a story. In every case, you need to choose the supporting information – such as examples, illustrations, statistics, quotations or the like – that best achieve your purpose.

“Tone” is a more vague term. It describes the feeling of your writing: how formal or informal it is, how much your own experiences come through versus how objective you need to be, or whether you have a particular attitude or position toward your subject. Audience and purpose have a large effect on tone. Most academic writing is formal and usually objective in tone, though in some fields – especially in the humanities and some social sciences – subjectivity is valued.

Throughout the writing process think about who your audience is, what your purpose in writing and their purpose in reading is, and what tone can help you accomplish that purpose for that audience.