

TONE: ACADEMIC VERSUS COLLOQUIAL

The term “colloquial” refers to a style of writing that is conversational (i.e., chatty). Usually, college professors want students to discard the colloquial write-like-you-talk style and embrace a more professional, analytical tone (i.e., academic writing). This means using precise language, sounding confident, avoiding language with which you are unfamiliar, prioritizing clarity, and getting rid of filler words such as “really,” “actually,” “literally,” “basically,” and “quite.” For an in-depth look at cutting filler words see our handout on concision and clarity.

EXAMPLE OF CONVERSATIONAL LANGUAGE	TIPS ON HOW TO MAKE THE SENTENCE SOUND “ACADEMIC”	EXAMPLE OF ACADEMIC LANGUAGE
<i>I thought the writer did a great job in the book because it talks so much about her life as an actress.</i>	<p>AVOID EMPTY PHRASES that lack details or evidence. In this example, “did a great job” isn’t useful. <i>What</i> did she do a great job of?</p> <p>“Talks so much about” could be evidence, but doesn’t explain what “talk[ing]” means in the context of the sentence.</p>	<i>The writer skillfully narrates her experiences as an actress through the use of witty language and non-linear storytelling.</i>
<i>But frankly, I cannot believe she got to meet all the people she said she did. She must be making the whole book up.</i>	<p>AVOID IMPOLITE ASSESMENTS OR HASTY GENERALATIONS of a text; (“must be making the whole book up”)</p> <p>AVOID CONVERSATIONAL EXPRESSIONS (“frankly,” “got,” “making the whole book up,” and all contractions, e.g., “can’t” and “don’t”)</p>	<i>Because she does not provide many details about the famous people she met, I question the reliability of her stories.</i>
<i>I think she may have ought to use more specific details about her celebrity friends.</i>	<p>AVOID HEDGING*. Phrases like “I think,” “I believe,” and “maybe” make you sound less confident. The reader knows that what they’re reading are your ideas, so why do you need “I think”?</p> <p>Also, don’t use the first person (“I”) unless your instructor has specifically said you are allowed to.</p>	<i>More specific details would add flavor and life to her celebrity friends.</i>
<i>In the second chapter, the writer reconnoiters her feelings of lonesomeness despite being inundated by people.</i> *We used Word’s synonym finder to create this sentence.	<p>AVOID LANGUAGE YOU CAN’T DEFINE. Most of the time, using \$100 words that you can’t define backfires. It often leads to awkward syntax and misunderstandings about your ideas. Using academic language isn’t about wordiness or using complex language. It is about clarity.</p>	<i>In the second chapter, the writer explores her feelings of loneliness despite being surrounded by people.</i>

<i>Sometimes, she volunteered in the ghetto's soup kitchen, which was full of poor people.</i>	<p>AVOID OFFENSIVE LANGUAGE AND SLANG. Offensive language demonstrates a lack of respect or understanding for your subject matter, which weakens any argument you may be trying to make. Instead, be very specific about the people or things you are discussing. Also, avoid making judgments or generalizations when they aren't relevant to the content you are discussing.</p>	<i>Sometimes, she volunteered in a soup kitchen.</i>
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***HEDGING IS NOT THE SAME AS QUALIFYING.** Avoid overly broad assessments:

To resolve an argument, women like to talk about their feelings while men prefer to move on from an argument quickly.

Instead, qualify your statement:

In a survey by Dingo, 76% of women said they like to talk about their feelings in order to resolve an argument. Sixty-seven percent of men, on the other hand, preferred moving on quickly (2007).

This kind of assessment needs a citation to support it because it is not commonly accepted knowledge. See our “Summarizing, Quoting, and Paraphrasing” handout for more information.

ADDITIONAL TIPS

Early in the semester, ask your professor if you may read a successful student paper, looking for use of language, style choices, and what’s appropriate in your discipline.

If your professor offers feedback on full or partial drafts before the deadline, submit yours early.

Read the introductory materials in your citation handbook (MLA, APA, CMS, etc.). These manuals explain the kind of writing expected in various disciplines.

Read journal articles in your discipline to learn more about your field’s preferred writing style.



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