

How to Create a Formal Tone for Workplace Writing

Brainstorming Sessions in technical and business writing classes taught by Mary Reilly McCall

Do not use "I think" or "I believe" or "I feel." Instead, use statements that make a claim and support the claim with evidence. Ex., instead of "I think the company should focus R&D on solar vs. thermal energy" say "R&D should focus on solar energy research because, according to the EPA, solar infrastructure will comprise one-half of all new structures in the U.S. by 2025."

Write in the 3rd person: "He / They / Employees / The company" not "Our company / We / You."

Address people formally, by last name and / or job title: "Dear Ms. Smith:" or "Allow me to introduce Dr. Jones."

Know and respect the power relationship. Remember who has the decision-making power. Know when to be formal and how formal to be.

Be courteous. Instead of ordering, suggest. Instead of demanding, request. Ex., instead of "Contact me" or "Send your comments" say "Please feel free to contact me" or "May I have your comments by xxx?"

Match the writing format to the occasion and use the format properly. Ex., when you want to sell a product or service, use a Proposal format. When using a memo, make sure the Subject line contains key information so the reader will read it. Use subheadings appropriate to the format chosen.

Write in complete sentences versus fragments.

Capitalize proper nouns (avoid "Twitter-ese" and "Text Message-ese").

Use conventional grammar, punctuation and spelling. Ex., instead of "thru" use "through."

Be concise. Minimize the conversational style in favor of swiftly delivering the message.

Use appropriate vocabulary. Instead of slang or jargon, use formal words. Ex., instead of "We came up with the idea to..." say "The team worked together to develop the idea to..."

Avoid contractions. Instead of "Don't hesitate to call me" say "Please do not hesitate..." or "Please feel free to call me with any questions."

Don't use all CAPITAL letters. The audience reads this as shouting.

Limit the use of abbreviations (be sure to spell out on first reference) and avoid emoticons.

Use active listening so as to match the tone and approach of the intended audience.

Don't disrespect the competition. Be descriptive vs. evaluative when speaking of competitors.

For presentations: Dress appropriately for the occasion, limit verbal pauses (um, er, etc.).