

Campus Academic Resource Program

Subjective Tone and Objective Tone

This handout will:

- Define subjective tone.
- Define objective tone.
- Provide examples to illustrate the differences between subjective and objective tones by discussing personal pronouns, precision and clarity, the use of factual evidence, thesis/hypotheses, and sources.
- Offer space to practice recognizing and writing in subjective and objective tones.

Subjective and Objective Tone

In Humanities courses, we are often asked to write essays where we argue for a position by using our own ideas, opinions, or personal experiences. These aspects, along with credible sources, generate a strong argument. The kind of writing, where, we include our personal opinions, judgments, or anecdotes, employs **subjective tone**. When writing in the Sciences and Social Sciences fields, we are often asked to support an argument using only the facts and figures present. When we write in a manner that does not include our personal opinions, or judgments, we are using **objective tone**.

General Rule: Opinions are subjective; facts are objective.

Subjective Tone:

A subjective tone is employed in any writing that uses emotions, personal opinions, and/or evaluative judgments to reflect upon a topic or construct an argument. In a subjective essay, a writer makes a claim or assertion about a topic and expresses their feelings about the topic. Instead of presenting the available information, subjective writing conveys a particular attitude and focus on a writer's response to the material.

Examples of subjective sentences:

- The book we are reading for this class is boring and no one likes it.
- I think the new restaurant by the pier is absolutely atrocious.
- Unfortunately, California's current drought has led to an increase in water restrictions.

Subjective Writing General Guidelines:

- The language used in subjective writing typically employs active voice. Using an active voice expresses a particular stance towards a subject and makes an author's presence felt. (For more information see our Active and Passive Voice handout at: carp.sfsu.edu/content/helpful-handouts)
- Subjective writing uses first person pronouns such as I, me, my and mine.
- It is mostly employed in non-scientific/social science disciplines (i.e. Humanities/Creative Arts).
- Subjective writing allows for a writer's presence and opinions to be expressed within the language.

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Objective Tone:

An objective tone uses language that does not express a biased view towards the subject. Using an objective tone allows us to support our thesis using only evidence, facts, and ideas as they are. When writing objectively, opinionated claims about the topic must be avoided. This is not to say that you should not have an opinion on the topic of your objective paper. Your opinion can play an important role in the direction and organization of your writing, but you must make sure that the language you choose does not directly reflect a personal opinion or a bias viewpoint.

Examples of Objective Sentences:

- Historians and literary scholars have had numerous debates concerning the morality and ethics involved in Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein*.
- The methodology used for this lab is based upon the strategies that have been implemented by other researchers.
- The recent drought has had a notable effect on California's water supply and has impacted the state's water regulations.

Objective Writing General Guidelines:

- Objective writing presents an argument based around evidence (i.e. facts and supported ideas), not personal views/feelings/bias.
- The language used in objective writing shows caution about one's views and allows room for others to disagree.
- When writing in the Science and Social Science fields, you are often required to write in an objective manner.
- Objective writing primarily consists of passive voice and distances one's opinion from the provided evidence.

Personal Pronouns:

- When writing objectively, avoid using personal pronouns (I, my, me, mine) and personal anecdotes. Although this is the general rule, you can use some pronouns objectively. Evidence of this can be seen in the examples provided below.

Examples with personal pronouns:

- *Subjective:* We performed the experiment and experienced disappointing results.
- *Objective:* We performed the experiment and found that the results did not support our initial hypothesis.

Examples without personal pronouns:

- *Subjective:* The experiment was performed and the results were disappointing.
- *Objective:* The experiment was performed, and the results did not support the initial hypothesis.
- Although both of the personal pronoun examples contain the pronoun "we", the subjective example contains the adjective "disappointing", which indicates that judgement has been placed upon the topic.
- The objective personal pronoun example, while still using the personal pronoun "we", does not express any opinionated views towards the subject. To remain objective, be cautious with the ways you incorporate personal pronouns into your writing.

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Precision and Clarity:

- Ambiguities in objective writing may prevent the reader from grasping crucial concepts in your essay. To increase the clarity of your argument, abstain from using figurative language. You should not include ambiguous details and avoid using similes and metaphors.
- Examples:
 - *Subjective:* We searched the forest for what seemed like decades and, despite our best efforts, we saw no sign of the hideous banana slug.
 - *Objective:* After four hours of close observation, over six acres of forest floor, we were unable to locate and observe a banana slug.
- Both sentences express a similar idea but the diction in the objective sentence does not express judgement towards the topic.
- The facts that are available in the objective example are presented to the audience in a clear and concise manner, free of the author's personal views towards the subject.

Using Factual Evidence:

- In an objective "argumentative" paper, the facts should speak for themselves and make up the bulk of the argument. The organization of the available facts and figures will further build upon your existing argument.
- Abstain from commenting on the evidence you present within your paper.
- Examples:
 - *Subjective:* In my opinion, turkeys are among the most ridiculous animals in existence.
 - *Objective:* In C.A. Miller's *Avian Blockheads*, Miller states that turkeys have some of the lowest intelligence levels of all birds. According to Miller, a flock of thirty turkeys scored forty percent lower on a bird IQ test than equal numbered groups of ostriches, emus, and penguins.
- The objective example presents evidence that supports the author's assertions, while the subjective example reflects an opinioned claim made by the author.
- The phrase "in my opinion" and the word "ridiculous" indicates that the author is expressing their personal view, thus making the tone of the first example subjective.

Thesis/Hypothesis:

- When forming a thesis/hypothesis, it is important to avoid using first person pronouns (I, me, my, mine). Everything you say in a conjecture, or hypothesis, should be based on logic and factual evidence. Your statement should not express a biased viewpoint.
- Examples:
 - *Subjective hypothesis/thesis:* Although there is little evidence to support my claim, I intend to show how X, Y, and Z are true and why I believe this is the case.
 - *Objective hypothesis/thesis:* This study shows X, Y, and Z, therefore one could hypothesize that A is occurring. The following essay will work to prove this hypothesis.
- The subjective example uses the first person pronoun "I", which indicates that the sentence directly reflects the author's personal viewpoint. The phrase "I believe" indicates that the author is making an opinioned claim.
- The objective example presents the study and the provided evidence without imposing the perspective of the author upon the audience.

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Sources:

- Whether you are writing a subjective or objective essay, always find credible sources that support your argument (books, scholarly journals/articles, university websites etc.).
 - The credibility of your sources will not only determine the credibility of your paper, but your credibility as a writer.
- Be aware of where your source has gathered their information from, and the number of times your source has been cited.
 - Academic databases, such as the “Web of Science” have citation networks which allow you to view the number of times an article has been cited and who has cited it.
 - The “Web of Science”, and many other useful databases, can be accessed through the SFSU library website at: library.sfsu.edu
- Examples:
 - *Subjective:* My successful attempt to train my two adult dogs how to sit and shake has proved that old dogs can learn new tricks.
 - *Objective:* There is a saying that states “you can’t teach an old dog new tricks,” however, a new study out of the University of Neptune claims that dogs ages 3-6 can learn new commands almost as fast as their younger counterparts.
- The phrase “my successful attempt” imposes the writer’s presence upon the audience and indicates that judgement has been placed on the topic, thus making the sentence subjective.
- The objective example references a study from a fictional university and attempts to use data to assert a claim. Since the statement is based on evidence, and does not reflect a particular bias, it can be considered an objective sentence.

Finding Credible Sources:

- To establish whether or not a source is credible you should look at the source, the date of publication, and the type of audience your source addresses.
 - If the information is based on well-known material or established authors, then you can assume that the source is credible.
 - The date of publication may indicate whether or not a source is relevant to your particular argument.
 - Acknowledging an article’s audience allows us to recognize any biased viewpoints that may exist, and allows us to further understand our sources.

Exercise 1:

Directions: Determine circle whether the given sentences are written in a subjective or objective tone. In the lines provided below, explain what terms or phrases helped you come to your conclusion.

- 1) Although the shark population has dwindled over time, evidence suggests that their numbers will increase within the next few years.

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- 2) The fish they sell by the pier are better than the fish available at the supermarket.

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- 3) There is no denying that basketball is the greatest sport of all time.

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- 4) According to the latest campus wide survey, undergraduate college students tend to eat fast-food more frequently than graduate students.

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- 5) The data that has been collected depicts a recent decrease in the nation's fossil fuel consumption.

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- 6) The newest installment in this historic franchise puts all the previous movies to shame.

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- 7) The instructor introduced the new topic to her undergraduate students.

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- 8) Although the food here is affordable, I do not like the location of the restaurant.

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- 9) The student's latest experiment generated mixed results.

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- 10) In my opinion, you can't start a Sunday morning without a plate of waffles.

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Exercise 2

Directions: The following sentences have been written with a subjective tone. Read each sentence carefully and rewrite them with an objective tone.

- 1) The prestigious awards that have been given to this establishment, and the positive responses from notable television personalities, prove that this is the best pizza place in the entire Bay Area.

- 2) The bothersome man was rude to other customers, and refused to tip the friendly waiters.

- 3) In my opinion, elephants would be so much better if they were purple.

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- 4) The evil wizard smelled gross and always made inappropriate expressions.

- 5) The ideas expressed in *Frankenstein* are often seen as perverse, and make people feel uncomfortable.

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Answer Key:

Exercise 1

- 1) Objective Tone -The facts that are presented in this sentence do not express a particular stance on the subject. In addition to this aspect, the language used in this sentence does not express a bias viewpoint.
- 2) Subjective Tone – By claiming the fish by the pier are better, the author is placing judgement on the subject. The sentence also does not contain any factual evidence, which indicates that the statement is based on a person’s opinion, thus making the sentence subjective.
- 3) Subjective Tone – The phrase “there is no denying” reflects an evaluative judgement, thus making the sentence subjective. The use of the word “greatest” also indicates that the sentence is based on an opinion.
- 4) Objective Tone – This sentence is based on a hypothetical survey, and uses the survey as a way to present evidence. The language used in this sentence does not express the author’s opinion, and conveys the facts as they are.
- 5) Objective Tone - This sample sentence discusses the author’s data but does not express an opinionated view on the subject.
- 6) Subjective Tone - The aspect that makes this sentence subjective is the phrase “to shame”. The word shame has negative connotations, which indicates that there is a judgment being placed on the topic.
- 7) Objective Tone – The language used in this sentence does not hint at a bias or opinionated view. The sentence conveys what has taken place without including the author’s personal ideas.
- 8) Subjective Tone – The words “I do not like” expresses the author’s opinion and indicates that a judgement has been placed on the subject, thus making the tone of the sentence subjective.
- 9) Objective Tone – The statement is describing what has taken place, but does not express a particular stance towards the topic.
- 10) Subjective Tone – The phrase “in my opinion” indicates that the sentence is not based on factual evidence, and may reflect a bias viewpoint.

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Exercise 2

There are multiple ways to rewrite the sample sentences that are present in the second activity, but a successful answer will have particular aspects. Each reconstructed sentence must avoid personal opinions and should not express a bias viewpoint. A successful objective sentence should focus on the facts that are present, and should not contain any judgmental statements. Below are sample answers to the practice sentences. Although your answers do not have to be identical to the ones below, they should contain similar objective aspects.

- 1) This Bay Area pizza place has received multiple awards and has been featured on both national and international television shows.
- 2) The man did not associate with other customers, and did not tip the staff members.
- 3) A recent study suggests that purple elephants may be more aesthetically pleasing than grey elephants.
- 4) The wizard had not bathed in a while, and made numerous facial expressions.
- 5) The subject matter of *Frankenstein* has been regarded as controversial by many postmodern critics.

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