

Setting the Proper Tone

In face-to-face communication, meaning is conveyed through words, vocal tone, and body language. However, when communicating virtually, a faculty member must be able to convey a positive and encouraging tone without the latter two elements. The tone of a message indicates how the writer feels about the subject matter and his or her audience. A facilitator's tone should be professional and direct, yet natural. It should be apparent that thoughtful consideration has been given to the subject matter, that the facilitator views the students as colleagues, and that he or she is open to and welcoming of comments and responses. How students perceive the tone of a message is not always immediately apparent. Students might read between the lines and, thus, misconstrue intended meaning. A careless joke can flop with unexpected consequences, or an offhand comment can be viewed negatively. Consequently, facilitators must carefully choose their words and diligently monitor their communication with students to avoid misunderstandings.

Setting the Tone

The facilitator establishes a class's atmosphere with the tone he or she uses in all communication with the students. If the facilitator's tone comes across as respectful, courteous, and professional, students will likely feel more comfortable asking questions and contributing to the class discussion. However, if the facilitator appears critical or reserved, students may be hesitant to ask questions or to interject their experiences.

Written communication does not allow for visual cues (such as raised eyebrows to denote surprise) or verbal cues (such as voice inflections to denote emphasis). Instead, tone must be conveyed through words and visual enhancements.

South Louisiana Community College (SLCC) serves a diverse group of learners. However, a diverse student body can create communication challenges. People without a common background don't always understand one another. Take care to avoid miscommunication by carefully considering the tone in your messages.

Identify Common Causes of Miscommunication

- Lack of Nonverbal Cues
- Direct Writing Style
- Diversity
- Time Constraints

Use Proper Tone to Avoid Miscommunication

- Understand Your Students
- Maintain Professionalism
- Incorporate Strategies
- Use Proper Online Netiquette

Online Netiquette

Keep the intended audience in mind/ Personalize Greetings.

Personalize your message for a particular audience, be it one student or the entire class. Use appropriate greetings in your messages, reference specific comments, and direct questions to specific students. For example, “Don, Hello. you indicated your company practices this method. Can you provide us with an example of when it was effective?”

Maintain professional and respectful dialogue at all times.

Be positive and polite with your words. For example, “Respond to me as soon as possible” sets a different tone than “Please respond to me as soon as possible.” Remember, it can be difficult to tell if someone is in earnest, joking, calm, or upset.

Use a natural, conversational style of writing.

Writing should not be overly formal and rigid. Write to the students as if you were speaking to them in person. Read your writing aloud to determine how your words might come across to a reader.

Use a clear, direct approach to writing.

Avoid technical or stuffy language, and use simple, concise sentences. Avoid the passive voice and be specific.

Reference course materials and/or your own experiences whenever possible.

Relate communication back to the course objectives, and personalize information based on your experiences.

Use emoticons when appropriate to reinforce humor, disappointment, etc.

However, avoid overusing emoticons or using them in place of fully explaining the meaning of your statements.

Carefully choose your font size, type, and color.

Using a bright pink font may not convey a professional tone as much as a standard black or navy font would. Large or bold large fonts might make your message seem shouting and accusatory.

Use the sandwich technique.

- Remember to begin on a positive note, placing the constructive aspect of your point in the middle of your text, and ending on a positive note.
- Careful word choice can make all the difference in communication.

Maintain professional and respectful dialogue at all times.

- Don't respond to students' posts when you are angry.
- Type a response, but save it to your drafts until the next day. Chances are that when you come back to read your response, you'll be glad that you didn't send it.

Take advantage of the asynchronous aspect of the classroom.

A major benefit of teaching online is that you can save notes to your drafts and review them later to provide a better perspective on the tone of a particular note. Is it respectful, courteous, professional, and constructive? Read it aloud. What might the ramifications of a statement be—how could it be construed? Would you be comfortable saying the words in a face-to-face conversation? Make any changes you deem necessary to improve the tone before sending the message.

Wrap Up

Tone is crucial to the engagement within the classroom. A facilitator's tone must be that of a coach—encouraging, guiding, and consistently enabling students' success. By carefully crafting every message, being mindful of its tone, and taking the time to review your work, you can become a more successful written communicator.

Conflict may occur within the classroom. Conflict resolution can differ depending on its cause. Ask questions to find the root of the student's questions and ensure students feel their opinions are valued. Using a non-confrontational and non-biased approach with all students. Since different opinions are, in general, not completely right, or wrong, as you present an unbiased view, you may help students see that each side has some merit. By using the proper tone to manage disagreements or conflict within the classroom your students will have a more positive learning experience.