

Academic Voice FAQs

What is academic voice?

The appropriate voice, tone or style for a piece depends on its audience and its purpose. How you organize points, word choice and the way in which you address your audience all convey attitude and emotion in academic writing. Sentence structure, the length and level of complexity, have an effect on tone as well. Writing Center handouts aim for a neutral, concise tone so writers can skim them, know what to do, and get back to their assignment. North American institutions value a confident, direct approach using a neutral tone. Generally:

- Acknowledge others' ideas
- Treat opposing views respectfully
- Be analytical
- Use active voice & scholarly vocabulary
- When using a big word or jargon make certain to use it correctly

How does audience affect voice?

The main audience for most assignments is your instructor but it is useful to imagine another set of readers who you are also writing for. Understanding who this audience is will affect how you make your arguments and what words you choose to make them.

Tips

If English is not your first language, remember it is most important to convey meaning clearly, not to write grammatically correct sentences.

Your multiple languages give you a richer perspective and so a more interesting voice.

- If it works better to form ideas in your native language and then translate, try it. Online tools such as Google Translate can assist with this.
- Have a native speaker read to you and read to them as well. Slow down the pace and point at each word to help with accurately reading the words on the page.

Should I address a reader directly?

Directly addressing a reader using the pronouns I, me, you, we or us can cause confusion about what the subject of the sentence is and appear too informal. Use first or second person in personal essays, at an instructor's request, or employ direct address in drafts if it helps you construct your ideas. Simply put, when choosing direct address for an academic piece, it should be clear it is appropriate and intentional. Some strategies to avoid it:

- Replace a pronoun with "the reader"
Lee shows us a great father in Atticus Finch's character.
Revision
Lee shows the reader a great father in Atticus Finch's character.
- Replace a pronoun with "one"
Clearly, you must not judge people before knowing them.
Revision
Clearly, one must not judge people before knowing them.
- Reword to focus on the argument or topic
I think the author uses metaphors to express themes of tolerance.
Revision
The author uses metaphors to express themes of tolerance.

Should I use active or passive voice?

Grammatically, this indicates the way nouns and verbs relate to each other. Academic papers usually use the active voice since it is more direct and concise. If you want a sentence to focus on the target of an action or you want to de-emphasize the actor, then the passive voice is the better choice but do not use it as your main sentence structure.

- Active Voice emphasizes the actor, it is the subject of the sentence and the object is its direct target.
The student wrote the paper.
- Passive Voice The subject of the sentence is the object that receives the action.
The paper was written by the student.