Academic Voice FAQs

Metro State Writing Center, Fall 2023

# **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 how you address your audience all convey attitude and emotion in academic writing. Sentence structure and the length and level of complexity influence 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 universities value a confident, direct approach using a neutral tone. Generally, try to:

* Acknowledge others’ ideas
* Treat opposing views respectfully
* Be analytical
* Use active voice & formal, 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 use.

# **Should I address the audience 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. Only use first or second person in personal essays, at an instructor’s request, or in a first draft if it helps you construct your ideas. Simply put, when choosing a point-of-view for an academic piece, it should be appropriate and intentional. Some strategies to avoid using personal pronouns are to:

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

* **Active Voice** emphasizes the subject of the sentence, and the object is its direct target.
  + The student wrote the paper.
* **Passive Voice** reverses the order to make the subject of the sentence the object that receives the action.
  + The paper was written by the student.