

Academic Voice

We all know that we can't write papers for class with the same words that we use in text messages, but sometimes trying to write with an "academic voice" can cause frustration and confusion. Let's look at the problem more closely.

Style:

Academic voice does *not* mean stiff, cold, or robotic writing, nor should it entail overly complex sentence constructions that hide the true meaning of the sentence. Although you will write more formally than you speak, you should not feel obliged to write in a language with which you haven't yet grown comfortable. You can write a formal paper with the words you already know.

Audience:

The need to write formally generally stems from the demands of the writer's audience. Just as certain social occasions call for formal attire, certain reading audiences require formal writing. Because your academic writing is addressed to the academic community, it would be inappropriate for you to address this audience the way you would a dear friend. Using an academic voice makes your ideas accessible to a community engaged in academic discourse, because this audience may not understand what you mean by certain slang terms or informal structures.

Strategies:

- Brainstorming:
 - o Use informal, conversational "freewriting" as a way to get your ideas flowing before you attempt to write with academic voice
- As you draft:
 - o Keep your audience in mind
 - o Eliminate contractions (e.g. don't, isn't, it's), colloquial phrases (e.g. "Freud's ideas are a little wacky"), and slang
 - o Model your language after the type of writing you have seen in articles and texts for class
 - o Use a thesaurus as a way to vary your writing, but be sure still to use words you *already* know; it's usually obvious to readers when you use words that you don't know (and they may even be used incorrectly)
 - o Make your subjects and verbs clear so that you and your reader know exactly what you are trying to communicate with each sentence
 - o Use transition words and phrases to make connections explicit
- As you revise:
 - o Read your own paper out loud to catch the spots where your efforts to write formally have created confusing and awkward sentences—or where your writing has become stiff and robotic
 - o Have others read your paper and identify any confusing or robotic parts
 - o Simplify confusing and awkward portions by saying what you mean out loud, as if in conversation. Then, clean up the new sentence construction (but don't convolute it) to give it a formal tone.
 - o Eliminate any unnecessary words (e.g. replace "in view of the fact that" with "since" or "because")

Remember that while this way of writing may seem foreign, inaccessible, or intimidating at first, the goal is still *communication*, just as it is with instant messages and everyday conversations. At all times, strive for *clarity* for your audience's sake, and your academic writing will reach the goal of communicating your ideas.