








Writing Process - 11

Academic Voice





-  Say you want a job at a bank. You go to the interview barefoot and wearing a filthy tank top. The interviewer—well-dressed and exceedingly professional—asks what previous experience you have as a bank teller. You respond, “I ain’t never been no teller, stupid. Now hire me.” How is that going to work out for you?
-  On the matter of voice, essays are like job interviews. You need to present yourself in the appropriate way. In the case of scholarly writing, you need to maintain authority by sounding intelligent, measured, and formal.
-  Many of us—all of us?—speak one way with friends and a different way with family. We even speak differently with siblings than we do with grandparents. The issue of academic voice is simply an extension of these “registers.” Scholarly writers—which is what you are—strive for a register that best represents them as thinkers.
-  Sometimes writing in an academic voice can feel stilted and unnatural. Be that as it may, it is a necessary part of your development as a student. The more you read and write, the more natural an academic voice becomes. As you progress as a scholar, writing academically will become merely another voice, one you can use just as comfortably as you can your “friend” voice or your “grandma” voice.

Strategies for Achieving Academic Voice

Foundational

-  Read scholarly writing. You learned to speak by listening to speakers and experimenting with what you heard; you’ll learn to write in a similar fashion.
-  Improve your vocabulary. Make an effort to expand the number and quality of words you can use correctly.
-  Improve your sentence variety. Sentences can be structured in many, many ways; notice how sentences work and try various structures in your writing.

Specific

-  Read your paper aloud and gauge how sophisticated the voice sounds.
-  Avoid using first-person pronouns (I, me, us, we, our) and second-person pronouns (you, your). This is not a hard and fast rule, but more traditional academics prefer strictly third-person objectivity (he, she, they, etc.).
-  Avoid contractions. Don’t write “don’t,” write “do not,” and so forth.
-  Avoid colloquialisms. We use many informal words and phrases in life, but you must learn to recognize and edit them in papers.

- 👉 Avoid clichés. Phrases we have read over and over again are boring and bespeak a lack of creativity and ambition.
- 👉 Avoid repetition. Using the same word and/or phrase multiple times in a single, short paper is uninspired. However, some students worry too much about repeating the subject of a paper; if you are writing about basketball, you will probably use the word basketball often.
- 👉 Replace so-called “to-be” verbs. Conjugations of the verb “be”* are less active than alternatives; they denote merely that something *is* and not what it *does*. See the Sam Houston Writing Center handout/tutorial on replacing these verbs.

*am, is, are, was, were, be, being, been