

THE ACADEMIC SUCCESS CENTER

at **Sam Houston**
STATE UNIVERSITY

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. However, 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: Reading your paper out loud will give you a chance to spot various minor errors and gauge how sophisticated the voice sounds.

Avoid improper pronouns: First-person pronouns (I, me, us, we, our) and second-person pronouns (you, your) should be avoided in most academic papers. Some instructors have different requirements for this, so consult them for accurate guidelines. Most academic papers will use third-person pronouns (he, she, they, etc.).

Avoid contractions: Combining two words using an apostrophe is considered informal in writing. Do not 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. Many colloquialisms are based on regional language differences. Some examples of colloquialisms include:

Coke vs soda or pop

Truck vs lorry

Soccer vs football

Avoid clichés: Phrases we have read that are overused and boring show a lack of creativity and ambition. Remember: aim for original or unique thoughts. Some examples of clichés include:

Scared to death

In the nick of time

Cat got your tongue?

Head over heels

Avoid repetition: Using the same word and/or phrase multiple times in a single, short paper is uninspired. Since most papers are written about a specific subject, that subject may be repeated often throughout the paper. However, a student should strive to vary their descriptions about the subject so as to avoid repetition and to make unique and interesting descriptions about it. If you are writing about basketball, you will probably use the word “basketball” often, but you should vary the specific aspects you discuss to make the paper unique and interesting.

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 Academic Success Center handout on replacing these verbs.

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