



Academic Voice for Graduate Writing

Writing assignments at the graduate level require that students adopt a formal tone of communication known as academic voice. This tone differs from conversational ways of speaking that include slang, contractions, intimate language, colloquialisms, and other informalities. Often (but not always), academic voice avoids “I” statements and “announcing” strategies or signals such as “In this paper, I will discuss....”

Academic voice is a formal way of writing and speaking that is clear, straightforward, and professional, but that also incorporates complex, subject-specific vocabulary and jargon without sounding fancy or using unnecessarily complicated sentence constructions. The central components of graduate-level academic voice include:

- making declarative statements,
- adopting an authoritative register (voice), and
- using subject-specific jargon.

Make Declarative Statements

Perhaps the most important part of academic voice is creating declarative statements. They are the same as “I” statements, only the “I” is hidden. For example:

“I” Statement: I think that school uniforms benefit students by eliminating competition based on designer labels.

Declarative Statement: School uniforms benefit students by eliminating competition based on designer labels.

Often you can create a declarative statement from your “I” statement or announcement merely by deleting the “I” part of the sentence. Make authoritative statements—declare your point.

Adopt an Authoritative Register

A “register” is the type of language you use in a specific setting. For instance, you speak differently to your friends than you do to your boss, your professor, or your faith leader. In each setting, you use a different register based on what you understand is appropriate behavior for that environment. There’s a reason people don’t swear in church- it is the recognition that certain types of speech are not appropriate for certain situations.

Students should strive to develop an authoritative register. To have authority over a subject is to know that you have done your research and can support your declarative statements. As

students become content experts in their fields of study, they should adopt an authoritative register. This eliminates casual language and relies on informed, declarative statements.

TIP: One way to teach yourself formalized language and register is to read newspapers, textbooks, academic journals, and nonfiction publications.

Use Subject-Specific Jargon

Often the term “jargon” gets a bad rap—people may accuse writing that is wordy, strange, or confusing, as being “full of jargon.” This often happens in undergraduate writing when students attempt to sound more professional. But jargon has an additional definition: the technical terminology specific to a school of thought, course of study, or profession.

- As a graduate student, you are growing your specialized vocabulary of technical terminology, and in your writing, you need to begin using this jargon to become more familiar with it yourself and to speak in a formal register.
- As an undergraduate student, you may have had to define specialized jargon for a general audience of readers. In graduate writing you may assume that your readership understands your field of study and, therefore, you may use the appropriate jargon without providing a specific definition.

For example:

As an undergraduate psychology major studying prejudice, you might have to define the bolded terms in this quote from a psychology paper (while in a graduate paper, you would assume your readers are already familiar with the terms in bold):

*“The purpose of this study was to expand the concept of **microaggressions** to sexual orientation and to explore themes, experiences, and the impact of sexual orientation **microaggressions** in **psychotherapy**”* (Shelton & Delgado-Romero, 2013, para. 11).

Tip: To grow your subject-specific jargon (as well as your ability to incorporate it seamlessly into your writing), read academic journals in your subject area and study how professionals in your field handle jargon in their publications.

Reference

Shelton, K., & Delgado-Romero, E. A. (2013). Sexual orientation microaggressions: The experience of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer clients in psychotherapy. *Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity*, 1(S), 59-70. doi:10.1037/2329-0382.1.S.59.