

Academic Voice and Formal Tone

A good writer thoughtfully uses language that aligns with the writer’s purpose and audience. This is true if we write a text message to our friend or a research paper for a college course. Using the wrong voice and tone can distract from a message or alienate an audience.

Writers can alter their voice and tone by making thoughtful choices.

Points of View

Be thoughtful when selecting point of view. Traditionally professors want students to write in the 3rd person. If you have a valid reason to write in the 1st person point of view for a college assignment, consider asking your professor if it would be appropriate for the assignment.

Depending on the professor and the assignment, it might be appropriate to have small sections of your college essay in first person. For example, you might include a short anecdote (perhaps in an introduction paragraph) about your connection to the issue or topic.

	1 st Person	2 nd Person	3 rd Person
Key Words	I, me, my, mine, myself We, us, our, ours, ourselves	You (singular), you (plural or “ya’ll”), your, yours, yourself, yourselves	He, him, his, himself She, her, hers, herself They, them, their, theirs, themselves One, one’s, oneself
Example	I think the tuition costs for college are too high. We need to take action to help our students. We should contact our elected officials.	You think the tuition costs for college are too high. You need to take action to help your fellow students. You should contact your elected officials.	The cost of tuition for college is too high. Society needs to take action to help students. Everyone should contact their elected officials.
Benefits	personal, individual, confessional, “warm”	Direct	Neutral, authoritative, not distracting
Drawbacks	Subjective, particular (not-universal), opinionated, potentially biased	Aggressive, finger pointing, can be alienating to reader Potentially limits audience scope—reader might not identify with the group addressed	Can occasionally seem a bit “cold” or distant—particularly if “one” is used: “When one is hungry, one wants a good meal.”
When to Use	Informal writing (occasional in academic writing too, when appropriate)	Rarely: letters, directions, direct communications	Academic/Formal writing



The Writing Center (SVLLC)

MLK 3315

writingcenter@bowiestate.edu –301-860-3720

Active vs. Passive Voice

Traditionally professors also want students to write in the active voice. Knowing the difference between active voice and passive will make you a stronger and more flexible writer.

What's Passive Voice?

A sentence is in the passive voice if we cannot tell who or what did the action of the sentence. Perhaps Christine did the action of the sentence? Or it was Roberto? We just don't know. We could even blame a horde of **passive** half-dead corpses—we could blame **zombies!**

Examples:

The ball was thrown.

- Who or what threw the ball? We don't know! Perhaps a zombie. Let's blame a zombie.

Recently, a study was conducted to see if college students eat enough vegetables.

- Who or what did the study? Could be zombies. Yes, let's blame the zombies.

What's Active Voice?

If you can easily tell who or what did the action of the sentence, you have an active voice sentence. Active voice sentences offer clear responsibility and clear causality. For this reason they are preferred by professors.

Examples:

Christine threw the ball.

Roberto conducted a study to see if college students were eating enough vegetables.

- No zombies can be blamed (or given credit) here. These are active voice sentences.

Note: Outside of the university, writing in the passive voice can be very useful: “Recently an unfortunate chemical leak occurred in our warehouse. While some mistakes were made, ChemCo is committed to addressing the issue and keeping all employees safe from future spills.”

Things to Avoid in Formal Writing

Avoid Slang—avoid informal word choices (**diction**) in formal college writing

Example: *What the researchers found was pretty cool.*

FIX: *What the researchers found was (important/surprising/etc.).*

Avoid Contractions—avoid informal combinations of two words in formal college writing

Example: *Students shouldn't forget that the library offers help with research projects.*

FIX: *Students should not forget that the library offers help with research projects.*



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