

The Writing Center @ KUMC

What is Academic Voice?

At the Writing Center, we hear from many of you that you've been away from academia for a while and feel shaky about writing or that you feel writing is not and has never been your "thing." Writing is one of the most important challenges you face as a student at KUMC. This handout focuses on "academic voice" so that you can meet the challenges of academic writing during your time as an undergrad or graduate student.

Part of the situation of academic writing is the work you read and often incorporate into your assignments. Research or scholarly writing has a style all its own. And depending on the discipline, that style may seem complex to understand, much less recreate. We want to emphasize that academic writing is not, by definition, a collection of long, wordy sentences filled with jargon. Doubtless, you will find many articles published in leading journals that conform to this description. However, "academese" is not a royal edict. "Writing is about communicating . . . not about trying to sound clever."¹ We agree. Research or scholarly writing is too important to be undecipherable to most students and other researchers.

A decent academic voice consists of your own voice combined with a fair and accurate interpretation/presentation of other voices in clear, direct statements. This combination depends on many things, but above all, on a firm grasp of the source material and an overriding need to help the reader understand you and the source material. Undoubtedly, you will have to expand your vocabulary because of the concepts and terminology you discover in multiple sources. This takes time and practice, but with each assignment you undertake, consider four areas to engage in:

1. Review and constructively criticize the work of others;
2. Use logic and evidence from research to build support for the conclusions of others;

3. Acknowledge all sources, both in the text and in references;
4. Maintain a serious, formal tone.²

As you can see, there is a premium placed on analysis here, as well as a well-structured, evidence-based approach. We want to stress two things: first, “review and criticize” is never divorced from a genuine *response*, both personal and intellectual at once; second, writing is always to some degree exploratory and often enough descriptive, whether the goal is analytical, theoretical, or empirical.

While research in medicine, nursing, and the allied health professions is often characterized as “disinterested language” that discourages a unique expression, a sophisticated academic voice is not or should not be limited to privileged audiences. We assert that a standard paper (whatever that is) must always be focused on producing new knowledge. This is especially important for those who have been out of school for a while, who struggle with academic writing, or who were born and raised in working class or educationally disadvantaged communities.

There is much that can be said about academic voice. For more than a century, many have believed that scholarly writing is unself-conscious, its language transparent. This belief flies in the face of a great deal of linguistic research, specifically into the nature of scientific communication. For now, we state that academic voice is formal, nonconversational, non-opinionated, and authoritative based on the research of others. That is a good starting point.

To learn more about academic writing, we suggest you visit our “Resources” page on our website, where you will find many handouts on a wide range of writing topics. These aids can save you time and help to fill in gaps in your knowledge about academic writing, academic voice, and ways to succeed in school through the written word.

1. Thomas, Gary. *How to Do Your Research Project*. 3rd ed. London: Sage, 2017.
2. Rosen, Leonard J. *The Academic Writer's Handbook*. 3rd ed. New York: Pearson, 2011.