

USING “YOU” IN ACADEMIC WRITING (PODCAST 13 TRANSCRIPT)

Click link for Podcast 13, Using “You” in Academic Writing:

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Greetings everyone. This is Kurtis Clements with another effective writing podcast. In this episode, I am going to talk about using the second person, you and your, in academic writing.

Many folks are confused when it comes to using the second person pronouns “you” and “your” in their academic writing, in large part because such pronouns are used often in other kinds of writing, so it seems natural to use such words in academic writing.

What is “academic writing”? Academic writing is writing that is generally formal; by and large, it’s the kind of writing produced in school when you are writing a report or an essay. Academic writing usually does not contain contractions or slang, nor does academic writing use emoticons or exclamation points. Academic writing sticks to a fairly objective point of view and avoids personal pronouns such as “I, we, us, our, you,” and “your,” for example. Now this is not to say that academic writing will never use such pronouns, but as a guiding general principle such pronouns are not used often in academic writing.

I don’t want to confuse you, but not all writing produced in school is “academic.” For example, if you were taking a creative writing course, while you may write essays that require a formal approach to writing, you will also be writing “creatively”—short stories and poems and other genres that would not require you to use “academic writing.”

Imagine a poem like Gwendolyn Brook’s “We Real Cool” in which the speaker, a thug without much of a future, says, “We real cool. We left school. We lurk late” written in formal academic writing like this: “They were indifferent to the conventional values of society. They left school. They lurked late at night.” Big difference, right? Of course. Academic writing is not the kind of writing to use when writing creatively.

Ok, so back to our discussion of second person. Second person is the use of the pronouns “you” and “your” in writing. In this podcast, I sometimes relate what I am talking about to my audience—to you folks listening right now—so I will make statements like “I don’t want to confuse you, but...” In my podcast, which is not a formal writing situation, it’s fine to use the pronouns “you” and “your.”

As a guiding principle, the second person pronouns “you” and “your” should not be used in academic writing. Using “you and your” is informal and lacks the kind of professional tone found in academic writing. “You” may work fine in some situations (like this podcast, for example), but in academic writing, such usage can be downright confusing. When I use “you” in my podcast, it’s clear that I am addressing my listeners. But let’s say you were reading a paper about recycling, something that you already do. What would your reaction be if every now and then the writer included a sentence like “All you would need to do is set up a few extra bins in your home for glass, paper, metal, and plastic, and



then put each item into its respective bin.” What would your response be? You would likely be confused, right? After all, you already recycle. And imagine other instances of the writer referring to “you” in a sentence. Every time you read “you,” you stop in your tracks and think, “Me?”

Let’s say the recycling paper’s purpose is to persuade and thus the logical audience would be folks who don’t recycle. Would “you” be appropriate then? No. While there would clearly be less confusion on the part of readers, writing of a more formal nature should be as objective as possible and not refer directly to readers. Imagine reading a formal academic essay that is arguing for greater individual effort to recycle, and throughout the paper the writer uses the objective third person point of view, making such statements as “Individuals have a responsibility to future generations to do what they can to cut down on waste” and “Individuals must be proactive in recycling at home and work,” and then all of a sudden, out of the blue, the writing shifts to second person and makes a statement like “You might be busy, but if you make recycling a top priority then you would probably be successful.” Whoa, right? Where did that sentence come from? As a reader, you were engaged in the persuasive but objective discussion of the need to recycle, when all of a sudden the writing shifts to second person, and it seems like the writer is pointing a finger at you.

The use of second person can be confusing, awkward, and off-putting in academic writing, so it’s best to avoid the pronouns “you” and “your.” A good way to ensure such pronouns don’t appear in your paper is to read your work slowly aloud. Mark each “you” or “your” you find and revise accordingly. With a little practice, keeping the second person out of your writing will come naturally.

Thanks for listening, everyone. Happy writing.

