USING ACADEMIC VOICE

When you talk with your friends, you most likely use different language than you would if you were talking with the President of the United States. The same is true in writing. If you are writing a message to your best friend, you will probably use casual voice. However, when you are writing academic papers, you should use academic voice.

Casual to Academic:
Let’s say that you are writing a paper on overpriced textbooks. The following sentence is written in casual voice, but can be edited to sound more academic.

- I can’t pay for textbooks because they’re so pricey.

Write out contractions:
Contractions are words joined together, using apostrophes in place of eliminated letters. In the above sentence, we have two contractions: can’t and they’re. An easy step in making a paper sound more academic is to write out any contractions.

- I cannot pay for textbooks because they are so pricey.

Eliminate unnecessary adjectives and qualifiers:
In the sentence, “so” is being used to qualify the word “pricey.” We use words like “so,” “really,” “super,” “very,” and “way” for emphasis. However, in academic writing, these words sound casual and are ineffective. In this case, “pricey” lets us know that textbooks have a high price, making the word “so” redundant. If you feel something needs to be emphasized beyond the strength of the actual word, try using “too,” “highly,” or “quite.”

- I cannot pay for textbooks because they are pricey.

Use more sophisticated language:
We can replace words in the sentence with more academic terms. Rather than saying “pay,” we might use “afford,” and instead of “pricey,” we can use “expensive.” These terms are more specific in nature, and they also sound more professional.

- I cannot afford textbooks because they are expensive.

Warning: Although you want to sound more academic, you don’t want to sound unnatural. The thesaurus is a helpful tool in finding more academic terms, but do not simply try to find the biggest, most complicated word.
available. If you would not use the word in a conversation with your professor, do not use it in your paper. This will help you maintain your own voice, while also improving the language or your paper.

**Academic third person:**
Many professors ask that you write in third person. The reason why is that when you write using the “I” voice, or first person, you are limiting your audience and softening your argument. For the sentence, let’s eliminate the first person, and create a sentence that better appeals to the audience using academic third person.

- Many students cannot afford textbooks because they are expensive.

**Eliminate slang:**
Although our example sentence did not have this problem, avoid using slang in your writing. Rather than saying, “What’s the deal with textbook publishers?” try “Why do textbook publishers charge such high prices?”

**Eliminate vague words:**
Instead of using vague words like “stuff,” “big,” “said,” “nice,” and “bad,” try words like “paraphernalia,” “significant,” “remarked,” “agreeable,” or “defective.” By eliminating vague words, your paper will be more specific, strengthening your paper.

**Eliminate clichés:**
Clichés are phrases that are used so often that they’ve lost their original force. Here are some examples:

- Her eyes were as bright as the sun.
- It was the time of my life.
- He is as fit as a fiddle.
- All’s well that ends well.
- When life gives you lemons, make lemonade.

By writing with an academic voice, your readers are more likely to respect what you have to say. You will sound more professional, and therefore, your readers will respect your argument as a more professional, academic, and informed opinion.