Ackroyd, Rebekah ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0003-7557-9985 (2025) Finding & using your academic voice. Research Intelligence, 162 (Spring). pp. 38-39.

EARLY CAREER RESEARCHER NETWORK

Finding & using your academic voice

REBEKAH ACKROYD
UNIVERSITY OF CUMBRIA

Early in my career as a secondary school teacher, I learned that if I wanted to gain the attention of my class it was more effective to lower the pitch of my voice, rather than raise the volume. Lowering the pitch cuts through the noise, making our voices more resonant, and enables the sound to reach the back of the room. In the classroom, after a few attempts, this adjustment is easily mastered. The challenge of finding and pitching one's academic voice is a little trickier but is of equal necessity.

The BERA ECR Network hosts several online coffee conversations throughout the year, providing a chance for ECRs at all stages (master's level to postdoctorate) to get together and share ideas. At a recent event, I was struck by the diversity of experiences and confident voices on the call. Yet, finding your distinctive voice as a researcher is no small undertaking.

Academic voice can feel at once omnipresent but elusive. As ECRs, we are surrounded by words and often have supportive supervisors and tutors with their own voice and style. There's the voice in our own minds, which sometimes nags at us to write, and the imposter voice which worries that what we write is not good enough. But sometimes knowing what we want to say or how we want to say it feels just beyond our grasp.

WHAT IS ACADEMIC VOICE?

Noting the absence of a definitive definition of academic voice, Robbins (2016) surveys multiple definitions of the concept and, in doing so, draws out its various hallmarks, which include crafting an academic style of writing, saying something distinctive, and having the confidence to express these original ideas without being overly reliant on the words of other scholars. Gray (2017) meanwhile highlights that the matter of what comprises or should comprise an appropriate academic voice also prompts questions relating to epistemology and representation. Discovering one's academic voice is thus related to discovering oneself as an academic, a point neatly summarised by Potgieter and Smit (2009, p. 222) who observe that 'if we do not have a voice, we also do not have a scholarly identity': it is about us 'being there' in what we write.

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HOW CAN YOU FIND YOUR ACADEMIC VOICE?

In order to explore how you might find your academic voice, I asked a selection of ECRs who have recently completed their doctorate in education for their advice.

- 'Make sure you are using language that brings clarity to your argument, rather than language that is overly verbose.' (Adrian Copping)

- 'Don't be afraid of "I" — there is a fine balance between a "soap-box" and demonstrating positionality and interpretation — stay close to the literature, but do not be afraid of showing your own critical subjectivity through your perspective, influence on thinking, or implications for future research.' (Lisa Reed)

- 'Be more Jamie (Oliver) and less Heston (Blumentahl), make your understanding accessible to everyone so that the reader is on the journey with you from start to finish.' (Phil Wright)

- 'Immerse yourself in the academic writing styles within your field. This will enable you to get a sense of how writers typically structure arguments and how they build and develop lines of argument.' (Nicola Marlow)

- 'Structure your paragraphs effectively: lead with your main idea. Present your argument upfront, then use the rest of the paragraph to support and elaborate on it, rather than building up to your key point at the end.' (Sin Wang Chong)

Striking among the advice I gathered is the emphasis which is placed on using your personal voice. While comfort with the use of personal pronouns may vary across disciplinary areas, in a review of 66 academic journals, Sword (2012) found only one which explicitly disallowed the use of 'I', suggesting that we should all feel at ease to attribute our voice to ourselves. Coupled

with this is the importance of clarity. Academic writing is not necessarily good writing. On the contrary, it can be jargon-filled, colourless and hard to follow. In order to be clear, we must know what it is that we want to say. On this point, Sword (2012, p. 44) observes that the most engaging writers are those who pay close attention to their readers, be they strangers or esteemed colleagues, 'in whose ears their own words will echo'. To me, this concept of echo is critical. It is not only the words that we use and how we use them which are important, but also thinking about how and where they will reverberate after they stop.

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For myself, although superficially comfortable using 'I', the ability to have conviction in what 'I' was arguing took longer to emerge. It takes a degree of courage to truly take ownership of the argument you want to make. However, it is doing so that conveys that conviction to the reader. As researchers, we occupy a privileged position, spending our time working on and generating ideas and concepts. In the midst of geopolitical tensions, the climate crisis and ongoing economic uncertainty our privilege demands not only that we find our academic voices, but that we have the courage to use them.

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