Overreaching: How to NOT Sound Like You’re Trying Too Hard

The pressure to achieve the right voice and sound “academic enough” can push students to overreach in their writing. The bad news: A forced voice erodes credibility, draws unwanted attention, & can muddy an argument.

The good news: The only *pressure* is to communicate CLEARLY & accurately! An authoritative tone isn’t necessary.

Because overreaching is most likely to show up in **introductions** and **conclusions,** here are some revision tips for keeping your language SIMPLE, GROUNDED, and FOCUSED on your point.

DIAGNOSTICS: What to look for and FIX

* **Sweeping statements that show how informed you are, but don’t specifically pertain to your central idea.** Credibility is not about *impressing* your reader with your personal awesomeness; it is about *gaining your reader’s trust*. Don’t brag, hide, minimize, withhold info, or condescend.
* **Abusive generalizations & wild overstatements.** No paper is improved by stuff like, “*We can all agree* ***[we ALL can?]*** *that a vast amount* ***[vast? seriously?]*** *of children’s television programming is essentially worthless fluff* ***[worthless fluff?]****.*”
* **Fancy, trendy, or unusual vocabulary.** Look up any word you use in a paper that you have not used in regular speech. Be sure to use it correctly.
* **The PASSIVE tense.** Don’t say, “The donut was eaten by my roommate” when you can say, “My roommate ate the donut.” Passive diction slows the energy, looks like filler, & often removes vital info—like WHO did the action. (So, “The mountain was climbed in record time” may be true, but your reader wants to know *who* climbed it!)
* **An excess of “BE” verbs.** TIP: Read through & circle every *is, am, been, are, was, were.*
* **Clichés or contrived wisdom.** Never, ever begin a paper with, “Since the dawn of time,” “Webster’s dictionary defines [insert word] as…” or, “Abraham Lincoln once said [insert legit or fake / unverifiable quote for credibility] . . .”

How to avoid the problem in the first place:

* **Read your writing out loud**. Sentences should sound the way you would speak in a structured but not stuffy setting, like giving a talk. You can always gradually & meaningfully increase the level of formality as the situation warrants.
* **Have someone read it out loud to YOU.** This can be a good way to discover that you sort of sound like a pompous poser. ☺
* **Unpack "suitcase terms,"** those broad, sweeping things, like "society," “our world today,” or even "the individual." Be specific and concrete about who, what, when, where, why, and how throughout your whole paper.
* **Resist the temptation to be a thesaurus junkie**. Simple and clear is always better than fancy.