Why do students use “you?”
In our speech, we often use “you” to mean “the general person.” Our listeners can tell from our tone of voice that we don’t mean them personally. This habit often translates into students’ writing.

Example: You should bring your book to class.
Problem: Readers can’t tell who the writer is referring to. Does the writer mean me personally? Or all of my classmates? Or students in general?

Why is “you” a problem in academic writing?
1. It is unclear. Readers don’t know who the writer is referring to.
2. It can be grammatically incorrect. In the example, “every student should bring your book to class,” the writer selected the wrong pronoun. The writer should say “his or her” instead of “your.”
3. It is too personal. The reader may think the writer is talking about the reader specifically.
4. In the worst case scenario, it is offensive. Sometimes, we write essays about sensitive, controversial topics. When a writer uses “you” with those topics, s/he risks offending the reader.
   Example: You shouldn’t abuse your child.
   Problem: This implies that the reader abuses his/her child, which is offensive to the reader.

How do we avoid “you” in academic writing?
Step 1: Find all uses of “you” in your paper. Use your computer’s find function to locate the word “you.”
   PC: ctrl + f
   Mac: command + f

Step 2: Replace the word “you” with a more accurate noun or pronoun.
   • Select the group you really mean to discuss
   • Use plurals to avoid awkward phrasing

Examples:
Original: Every student should bring your books to class.
Corrected: All students should bring their books to class.

Original: The book teaches us that you can’t trust anyone.
Corrected: The book teaches readers that they can’t trust anyone.

Original: Football players risk your health because you may get a concussion.
Corrected: Football players risk their health because they may get a concussion.

Review this material online at:
Prezi: Click here to learn more about how to avoid writing “You”
YouTube (captions available): Click here to watch a video about how to avoid writing “You”

Created March 2015
How to Avoid “You” in Academic Writing: Exercise

Instructions: Rewrite the below paragraph to remove the words “you,” “your,” or “you’re.”

Obesity is becoming a major issue in America today. Since many adults have bad eating habits, you’re passing those habits onto your kids. If you go to an elementary school at lunchtime, you’ll see kids eating Hot Cheetos, sour Skittles, and Coke. You shouldn’t give kids this kind of food! Furthermore, kids should be getting better exercise. You should take them to the park, sign them up for a sports team, or even buy them a Wii. At least then they’d be moving! But, it isn’t just kids who are out of shape. Adults don’t go to the gym anymore. You should go at least twice a week—and not just during January! Your New Year’s resolution should last all year! You might even find out that you like going to the gym if you can find the right class or exercise that makes you feel great! Even though Americans are facing high rates of obesity, you can fix it by exercising and teaching your children well.

To view a sample corrected paragraph, click here.

Next Steps: Review your next writing assignment carefully. Use the Find function to help find the word “you.” Then, replace “you” with more appropriate word choices.

Created March 2015