Academic Writing: Why “YOU” should not be used in formal essays

See what I did there with the title of this handout? If the quotations weren’t on the word you in that title, then the reader of this piece of writing would have thought it was specifically referring to him or her. The word you in formal writing takes attention away from the topic of the writing and makes the reader put themselves directly into the writer’s train of thought. That mental action can also cause the reader to be offended, depending on the topic of the writing.

Remember the audience of every academic paper includes the Professor, who decides the final grade of the assignment!

Imagine being an English professor that is reading through a student’s assignment while grading it. While skimming through the assignment for grammatical errors, the professor comes across a sentence that reads,

“This sentence alone can cause the professor to feel like the writer is specifically talking about him or her.

A More Formal Version of That Same Statement

The academic way of structuring the same statement from above can potentially be said like this:

“When most people walk the streets of New York, they tend to overlook and ignore homeless people.”

This sentence alone can cause the professor to feel like the writer is specifically talking about him or her.

Addressing the subject of the sentence in a general manner tends to keep the tone of the paper more formal than specific. Try to practice this style of writing in all of your writing assignments.