

Hi there,

Recently when meeting with a student to discuss his exegetical paper. I commented that he clearly told me what all the *experts* thought, but he never told me what *he* thought about the passage.

“But they are all experts!” he said

“Yes, they are”, I replied

“Why don't I just write what they say? They know more than I do.”

“Yes, but you need to show your judgement and your voice.”

“But I'm not an expert! Why should I give my uninformed opinions?”

I fully sympathise with this student.

Most experts do have better judgement than we do. So, if we are learning something so important as the Bible and Christian thought, why don't we simply say what the experts say and stop there?

I'll answer that in a minute, but first, a definition: *Academic voice*. There are two sets of voices in most things you write at College: Yours, and others'. Your voice is your thinking, your arguments, your ideas. The other voices are normally the experts – your sources.

First, let's think *why* we need *other* voices in our learning and assignments. There are at least four reasons we need sources:

1. First and most of all, we need to learn from other Christians who have gone before us. We are privileged heirs of the Great Tradition.
2. Second, and closely related, sources and set readings are there to make sure we have examined all important viewpoints on our issue. We are limited, and we can't imagine every perspective. So we listen to others.
3. Also, we use sources in assignments so we can learn to evaluate information. That's training for the rest of your life and ministry.
4. Finally, while we won't agree with every source, any good source should sharpen and stimulate our thinking. Some may support our thinking. Others we may reject. Others will force us to wrestle with new ideas.

So, *other* academic voices are vital to your assignments and to developing your skills as a minister of Christ.

Now for *your* academic voice:

Your academic voice is how you explain your answer. It is your words, your structures, your ways of explaining things. Your voice can be clear or unclear. But it is yours.

Your voice should dominate your work. After all, an essay, an exegetical paper, or a reflection exercise is meant to be *your* answer, not merely a patchwork of what others think. And your answer shapes everything. It determines your organisation, your argument, your explanation.

It will be informed by those other voices – your sources, the experts. They will inform and stimulate your thinking. But it needs to be *your* thinking, not theirs, in the end – even if you end up fully agreeing with some of them.

We use our voice to give our own answer. We use others' voices to give better answers. We may use them to support our arguments; we may repudiate them; or we may learn by wrestling with them. In the end, we write in our voice, acknowledging their input to our thinking.

Yes, there is a core body of knowledge you need to get in each subject. But in the end, we want to check how you use that information and knowledge: Can you apply it? Can you apply it well? Can you show skill and wisdom with it? (Besides, when the educational goal is simply facts, then you get simple quizzes.)

After all, when you lead a Bible study, or preach to a church, or disciple a Christian, you're going to have to think and apply, not just repeat the correct answer without understanding. God calls us to love him with our heart and soul and *mind* and strength. It's hard work, but it is godly work.

Back to my student and his very reasonable question of "Why shouldn't I repeat the experts? After all, they know more than I do."

Of course they do, and that's why we need them. And we are trying to teach you a certain body of knowledge. And we're also trying to give you skills to use that body of knowledge skillfully, to think Christianly, and to handle God's word responsibly.

But these are these are skills we can only assess when you apply them and explain them yourself, in your own voice.

So yes, you've got to use the sources. They inform your ideas. They support your ideas. They stimulate your thinking even if only by clarifying what you reject! But your voice needs to dominate all your work.

So, figure out how you would explain your topic to an intelligent friend. Start finding your academic voice. And start telling us your knowledge.

In your organisation

In your words.

But interacting with your sources.