Establishing an appropriate voice

You are writing an academic essay directed towards an academic audience. Because of this, you want to use (and avoid using) a specific style and vocabulary. You should focus on making your ideas clear through effective organization, word choice, sentence structure, and punctuation. The best place to look to review stylistic features is your style and reference handbook.

**Organization**-Use paragraph structure to move from concept to concept within your essay. You need an introduction that sets the stage for the entire essay. Within this introduction, you need to include a thesis statement that discusses the purpose of your essay (which is a discussion of whether or not the author successfully conveyed his/her argument through an awareness of audience and context and through her/his strategic presentation). Your body paragraphs should be organized in such a way that each idea flows naturally into the next idea. Transitional phrases and sentences will help you accomplish this purpose. Your conclusion should refocus your audience on your purpose for writing and leave them with a sense of closure.

**Word Choice**-Your word choice should be appropriate for an academic audience. This includes avoiding slang, too much technical jargon, and clichés. Notice how often you use the same term in order to avoid repetitiveness. You should also avoid using “you” in your essay because of the assumptions “you” makes about your audience. If avoiding “you” means avoiding rhetorical questions as a technique, I suggest that you do so. You should also be very careful about using “I” in your essay. You should not begin your claims with phrases like “I think”, “I believe”, or “I feel”. Instead, simply state and support the claim. (ex. Author X fails to use examples effectively because the examples she uses are not representative of the target group she claims to be discussing.) Don’t use contractions (don’t, doesn’t, can’t) in your essay. These are best left for less formal writing and conversations because it makes the essay sound informal, non-academic.

**Sentence Structure**-Try to vary your sentence structure as much as possible. Rarely should you use simple sentences to convey your ideas. They are usually more effective if they are used only occasionally for emphasis. Try to combine several related ideas into complex sentences in order to make the correlation clearer for your reader. (Warning-if you tend to have run-on sentences, you are taking this theory to extremes. Reduce the number of ideas you include in your sentences in order to increase clarity). Review parallel structure if you combine your ideas through compound sentences. Vary the beginnings of your sentences so that your style does not become too repetitive. Two sentences in the same paragraph should rarely begin with the same word.

**Punctuation**-If you are prone to grammatical and mechanical difficulties such as fragments, run-ons, and comma splices, review your essay with an extra critical eye for such difficulties. If you are unsure how to recognize such problems, refer to a style handbook. (You can find a variety of these in the R-MC Writing Center. Another good technique, which helps you avoid such problems, is reading your essay from the last sentence to the first sentence. This will make fragments painfully obvious. Review information on comma usage in Comma Karma. If you cannot justify using a comma by applying one of the rules you see, you should most likely not use one.