The *ubiquitous* *you*

*Ubiquitous* means “it’s everywhere! it’s everywhere!” *You* is one of the most overused words in our language. In formal writing, be careful. When using the word *you*, the writer should really mean “*you*, the reader,” not someone, anyone, or everyone.

**INFORMAL:**
If *you* add one and one, *you* get two.

**FORMAL:**
One plus one equals two.

**INFORMAL:**
*You* have to pay $7.50 to get into the movie.

**FORMAL:**
The movie costs $7.50.

**INFORMAL:**
If *you’re* late for school, *you’ll* get in trouble.

**FORMAL:**
Students who are late for school will get in trouble.

**INFORMAL:**
*You* have to pay taxes when *you* grow up.

**FORMAL:**
All people have to pay taxes when they grow up.
Ubiquitous You

Rule 1: You = Second Person = Speaking directly to the reader

Don't use "you" unless you are specifically speaking to your reader for a purpose. Usually the use of "you" either sounds slangy or gimmicky.

Rule 2: Don't use "you" when you mean "I," "students," "people," or "one."

Example: You write something for class that says:

You miss your bus because your sister is in the bathroom all morning. You have to go to the attendance office to get a pass even if you're just a little late.

I don't ride the bus or have a sister, or go to attendance. You mean:

I missed my bus because my sister was in the bathroom all morning. Students have to go to the attendance office to get a pass even if they're just a little late.

Rule 3: Don't confuse your and you're

your = possessive as in your shirt

you're = you are, as in you're going to need to study.

When students mix these two up, they end up sounding uneducated on paper.
What is Second Person? 

Definition 1: "Second person" refers to one point-of-view [i.e., perspective] from which a narrative is told. A story/letter/essay relayed in second person is addressed to "you" (see example, below). This point-of-view is very difficult to use effectively in academic writing; if the reader feels that the writer of the essay is addressing them directly, it will seem so informal they will find it very hard to take the subject matter seriously.

Definition 2: "Second person" is also used to refer to pronouns. The second person pronouns in English are "you" (singular and plural, subject and object case), "your" (possessive, singular and plural, determiner function), and "yours" (possessive, singular and plural, nominal function).

Example 1 of Second Person Usage:

You got in your car and drove away. You were so angry you could hardly focus on the road, and eventually you had to pull over and calm yourself down. You didn't want to run over some poor pedestrian just because all you could see was red. "I can't believe you said that to me," you thought.

Point-of-View: Your “Lens”

The standard take on point-of-view goes something like this: first person is too personal; second person is too informal and quirky; third person is utterly objective. Of course, this bit of wisdom has only a modicum of truth in it. It is possible for a skilled writer to wield all three points-of-view. However, until you are able to master this skill (or, are given permission to do so by your instructor), it is best if you try to keep your

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1 Information liberally adapted from: <http://teenwriting.about.com/cs/glossary/g/GlosSecndPerson.htm>.  
2 Information liberally adapted from: < http://web.nwe.ufl.edu/~jdouglas/lens.html>.  

college essays consistent, using one of these lenses. Usually, your professors are probably going to prefer the third person perspective because it appears to be making an attempt objectivity. Sometimes, your professor may allow you to write from personal experience and thus, using the first person perspective would then be appropriate (but, only if directed to do so). Rarely, will second person usage be tolerated in academic writing. Certainly, second person is not appropriate for this course. Unless your instructor tells you otherwise, please refrain from using it. Reserve the second person lens for speaking to one another, writing messages to one another, and for process writing, e.g., writing instructions (such as a recipe or a D.Y.I. guide).

Example 2 of Second Person Usage:

_You_ are not the kind of guy who would be at a place like this at this time of the morning. But here _you_ are, and _you_ cannot say that the terrain is entirely unfamiliar, although the details are fuzzy. _You_ are at a nightclub talking to a girl with a shaved head. The club is either Heartbreak or the Lizard Lounge. All might come clear if _you_ could just slip into the bathroom and do a little more Bolivian Marching Powder. Then, again, it might not. A small voice inside _you_ insists that this epidemic lack of clarity is a result of too much of that already. _The night has already turned on that imperceptible pivot where two A.M. changes to six A.M._ _You_ know this moment has come and gone, _but you_ are not yet willing to concede that _you_ have crossed the line beyond which all is gratuitous damage and the palsy of unraveled nerve endings.

Appropriateness: Would this tone sound awkward for an essay assignment that asks writers to “recall an event” from their own experience or for an essay assignment that asks readers to “make an observation” report of a situation they have observed? You bet it would!
Avoid using the second person pronoun ‘you’

In everyday conversation and in informal writing, we use the personal pronoun ‘you’ both to address our listener or reader and to make statements impersonal. While ‘You said I could borrow your car’ is clearly addressed at a particular individual, ‘You never know how things will turn out’ illustrates the impersonal use of ‘you’, the meaning being ‘No-one knows how things will turn out’.

By contrast, in academic writing, we avoid both uses of ‘you’. So, the sentence below can be improved by replacing ‘give you’ with ‘provide’:

- Neither qualitative interviews nor focus groups are likely to *give you* easily quantifiable, factual or objective data.
- Neither qualitative interviews nor focus groups are likely to *provide* easily quantifiable, factual or objective data.

In the following sentence, the informal ‘as you can see’ has been replaced by the more formal passive voice form: ‘as can be seen’.

- *As you can see* from the data, two-thirds of respondents are satisfied with the current provision.
- *As can be seen* from the data, two-thirds of respondents are satisfied with the current provision.

Another possible reformulation is:

- The data *show that* two-thirds of respondents are satisfied with the current provision.