

First-Person Usage in Academic Writing

A common area of difficulty for academic writing is avoiding the usage of first-person pronouns, such as “I” or “we.” Using first-person language may detract from the arguments and/or viewpoints present in the writing. This handout will cover how to avoid first-person usage, identify commonly used phrases, and rewrite those pesky “I” sentences.

Using First-Person Pronouns

In most academic writing, first-person pronouns should be avoided. For instance, when writing a research project, words such as “I,” “we,” “my,” or “our” should probably not be used. The same principle applies to lab reports, research papers, literature reviews, and rhetorical analyses, among many other academic writing genres. Why does the first-person voice cause a problem? First consider the content/focus of the assignment. If it is a lab report, the focus is not on what “I” did during the experiment. Rather, the focus is on the hypothesis, the methods, data, and conclusion. The same can be said for a literature review. It is not important what “I” read; rather, it is important to look at what the literature states and what limitations may exist. In a sense, logic can be used to decide if the “I” is necessary to the piece of writing. “I” statements are also often substituted to make up for a lack of reasoning or strength behind arguments.

Exceptions

Like many rules, there are exceptions to avoiding first-person usage. For instance, personal statements, reflections, opinion pieces, or any assignment directions that explicitly state using first person can and should freely use “I” statements. Writing in a first-person voice is *not* an error. However, there are simply times when it is appropriate and when it is not.

Avoiding Commonly Used “I” Phrases

Students often struggle with converting “I” statements into phrases that avoid the first-person pronoun. Commonly seen phrases include “**I hope,**” “**I believe,**” “**I feel,**” and “**I think.**” These phrases should be avoided in most cases because they simply add words but not depth of meaning to your writing; they do not add substance to a sentence. In some cases, these phrases can also weaken an argumentative stance. For example, it’s much stronger to state, “Bacon is unhealthy” instead of “I think bacon is unhealthy.” Take a look at the following example.

Option #1: I feel like Nike is the best brand.

Option #2: Nike is the best brand because it continues to deliver strong products.

Both phrases make a statement about a company. However, in option #1, “I feel” does not add any substance and detracts from the main thought of the sentence. Many writers also inappropriately use the term “I feel,” which should be reserved for when you are stating an actual feeling about your physical state (e.g., “I feel sick” or “I feel hungry”). Conversely, option #2 gets straight to the point by omitting “I feel” and instead adds more depth of content (by adding a “because” statement).

Re-writing “I” Phrases

If you’re stuck trying to change from first-person to third-person, consider the scope of your paper. As mentioned above, logically think about what the focus of your paper is: research? the findings? the analysis? Consider the following statement as an example: “We looked at that data to determine the best solution to fixing the housing crisis in San Jose.” The scope is the research and the examination of the data—it’s not about “we.” The statement could then be changed to avoid the first-person “we”: “The data was examined to determine the best solution to addressing the housing crisis in San Jose.” The first-person voice was removed, and the intent and focus of the sentence are now front and center.

Another example of re-writing “I” phrases is during argumentation. Instead of saying, “I think this author is conveying the main character’s despair...,” you can instead write, “the main character’s despair is communicated through the author’s use of...” The focus is on the main character’s despair and how the author conveys it rather than what “I” think.

Examples

Original: Our team wrote this literature review to look at the research on the benefits and drawbacks of constraint-induced therapy.

Revision: This paper examines the literature surrounding the benefits and drawbacks of constraint-induced therapy.

Original: I feel that the story of Jude’s character in Hanya Yanagihara’s novel *A Little Life* is the most devastating narrative to exist in modern fiction.

Revision: The life of Jude, a character in Hanya Yanagihara’s novel *A Little Life*, is the most tragic and devastating narrative in modern fiction.

Activity 1: Rewrite the Following Sentences

Rewrite these sentences to remove the “I” phrases.

1. I think that the world of sports is being diminished due to the widespread influence of social media.
2. We took the raw data from the surveys and proceeded to interpret the results.
3. I found that the article by Smith (2014) lacked sufficient statistical interpretation.

4. My belief is that our judicial system needs serious retooling to benefit everyone equally in modern society.
5. I think that *Dune* is the original sci-fi galactic story because I saw how *Star Wars* borrowed so much from *Dune*'s story.

Activity 2: Determine if the First-Person Voice Is Appropriate

Consider the following scenarios and determine if the first-person voice should be used.

1. Recommendation letter for a friend
2. Chemistry lab report
3. Op-ed piece on SJSU vaccination policy
4. Literature review for graduate thesis
5. "Letter to self" assignment

Answer Key for Activity 1

NOTE: There are multiple correct ways to rewrite these sentences.

1. The world of sports is being diminished due to the widespread influence of social media.
2. The surveys produced raw data that required immediate review and interpretation.
3. Smith (2014) presented some valid points about RNs during the COVID pandemic, but the author did not interpret the statistical data sufficiently.
4. The current judicial system requires serious retooling to benefit everyone equally in modern society.
5. *Dune* is the original sci-fi galactic adventure story; *Star Wars* borrowed storylines and characters from it.

Answer Key for Activity 2

1. Yes – the letter reflects your opinion about a person
2. No – the focus is on the hypothesis, methods, and results, not on you
3. Yes – an op-ed writing is about your opinions and thoughts
4. No – the lit review is focused on the strengths and limitations of existing research
5. Yes – "letter to self" assignments are addressed to yourself and are creative in nature