

UNIVERSITY WRITING PROGRAM

USING “I”: THE FIRST PERSON IN ACADEMIC WRITING

Students often arrive at college with strict writing rules in mind. Unfortunately, overly strict rules about writing can prevent us, as writers, from being flexible enough to adapt to the writing styles of different fields. So, when it suits your purpose, you will probably need to break some of the old rules, such as the rule that prohibit first person pronouns (i.e. “I” or “we”) in academic writing. This handout will discuss the first person’s uses and provide you with tips on when you should consider using it.

Benefits of the First Person:

In some situations, first-person writing can improve your writing in the following ways:

- **Assertiveness:** In some cases, you might wish to emphasize agency (who is doing what): for instance, you may need to point out how valuable your particular project is to the field, or to claim your unique perspective or argument.
- **Clarity:** Because trying to avoid the first person can lead to awkward constructions, passive voice, and vagueness, using the first person can improve and clarify your writing style.
- **Positioning Yourself:** In some projects, you must explain how your research or ideas build on or depart from the work of others, in which case you will need to say “I,” “we,” “my,” or “our.”

Potential Problems with Using the First Person:

- **Irrelevance:** Use of “I” or “we” often indicates personal material, and an excessive reliance on personal material can result in writing that focuses more on the writer than the subject at hand.
- **Not Enough Sources:** An overemphasis on personal opinions may result from a lack of scholarly sources that could support more empirical conclusions.
- **Narcissism:** An extensive focus on personal material may read as narcissistic self-absorption or a lack of academic rigor rather than an honest statement of one’s investment in the subject.

General Usage of the First Person:

- “I” or “we” is used most often in introductions; in articulating a paper’s argument; in conclusions to communicate what you learned through your analysis; and in methods sections to state what methodology you used.
- It is typically unnecessary to write “I believe that” because the reader knows that the paper is written from your perspective. Any uncited material is automatically attributed to you.
- In multi-authored papers, “we” refers to the authors, not to a communal “we.”

- To learn more about first person usage in your specific discipline (see below), pay attention to how it is used in published writing and ask your professors for their expectations.

Disciplinary Usage of the First Person:

While it is best to check with your instructor about using “I,” here are some basic guidelines:

Sciences:

- In the past, scientific writers have avoided the use of “I” because scientists often view the first person as interfering with the impression of objectivity they seek to create. But conventions are changing, and first person is being used more commonly—for instance, when an author is describing a project they are working on or positioning that project within existing research.

Social Sciences:

- Some social scientists avoid “I” for the same reasons that other scientists do. But first person is becoming more commonly accepted, especially when the author is describing their project or perspective.

Humanities:

- The purpose of writing in the humanities is generally to offer your own analysis of language, ideas, or a work of art. Writers in these fields tend to value assertiveness and to emphasize agency (who’s doing what), so the first person is often—but not always—appropriate.

Other Writing Situations:

- The first person is less common in technical writing. As an engineering professor once noted, “It’s not about you [the authors], it’s about the science.”
- If you are writing a speech, use of the first and even the second person (“you”) is generally encouraged because these personal pronouns can create a connection between speaker and listener and can contribute to the sense that the speaker is sincere and involved in the issue.
- If you are writing a resume, strenuously avoid the first person; describe your experience, education, and skills without using a personal pronoun.

Adapted from Lisa Rourke, The Writing Center At UNC (<https://writingcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/should-i-use-i/>), and The Thompson Writing Program at Duke University (<https://twp.duke.edu/sites/twp.duke.edu/files/file-attachments/first-person.original.pdf>).

The Brandeis University Writing Program, including the Writing Center, First-Year Writing, and Writing in the Majors, offers support for writing throughout the community, including undergraduates, graduate students, faculty, and staff.

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