

ACADEMIC AND BUSINESS WRITING – SELECTIVE USE OF THE FIRST PERSON

Points of view in writing

There are three different points of view that can be used in writing: first person, second person, and third person. In academic and business writing, the third person point of view is usually clearer and allows a writer to come across as more credible. Due to this and other reasons, the third person point of view is considered the best in academic writing. The third person, a key components of academic writing, is a voice intended to convey an objective point of view. One can easily implement the third person by avoiding words and phrases from the first or second person perspective.

First person occurs primarily through the use of the pronoun “I.” This is the point of view used when a writer is writing about himself. There may be times when it is okay to incorporate personal examples into an essay, and if so, the first person will be used. However, it is generally best to avoid referring to yourself, as the writer. Statements like “I believe” or “I think” tend to weaken writing and are better when written in the third person. (example: *“The government needs to pass this law”* is better and stronger than *“I believe the government needs to pass this law.”*)

Second person involves the use of the pronoun “you” to refer to the reader. There are few times to use the second person in academic writing, as it can alienate the reader. Let’s look at the following example:

All first-year university students should learn how to write well. Doing so will allow you to do better in school, and you will receive better grades.

Notice the shift that occurred from the first sentence, which is written in the third person, to the second sentence, which is written in the second person. This second sentence alienates readers who are not beginning college students since the information does not pertain to them. However, if the second sentence is written in the third person, even people who are not beginning college students can keep reading and learn from the essay:

Revised: All first-year university students should learn how to write well. Doing so will allow them to do better in school and receive better grades.

Third Person involves directly stating who is being written about without using the words *I, me, we, us, or you*. In the example above, the use of both *first-year university students* and *they* keeps this writing in the third person. To clarify, here are examples of sentences written in the various points of view:

First person: I should learn how to write well.

Second person: You should learn how to write well.

Third person: **First-year university students** should learn how to write well.

As mentioned earlier, most academic essays should be written almost entirely in the third person. The second person should be avoided, and the first person should only be used when using personal examples that help support claims made in the essay. In addition to enhancing credibility, another reason to write primarily in the third person is because frequent changes in point of view can create confusion for the reader. In business writing, this would enhance the professional and formal tone of the document.

Academic writing without using I or me

Even if you can get away with using the first person, it should probably be done sparingly, to avoid the charge that you are writing a memoir. Run a search for the word "I." Statements phrased from this perspective are in the first person and should be eliminated. Often, developing writers use "I think" or "I feel" in writing. Instead, find verified facts. For example, you could change the sentence "I feel Johannesburg is the best city in the South Africa" to "According to a Sunday Times reader poll, Johannesburg was rated the number one city in the United States in 2011."

Look for all instances of the word "we." You need to eliminate these as well. Instead of "we can all do better to curb pollution," a person could write, "The South African population must solve the pollution epidemic."

Eliminate all uses of "you." That's a red flag that you are using the second person (as this sentence does). Even though you will be speaking to a specific reader, you must not use this word in your research paper. Again, you can achieve this by changing sentences around. For example, "You can find support for my argument on cars in the Auto Trader magazine" could be changed to "Auto Trader supports the proposition that vehicles lose value as soon as they leave the lot." The latter sentence still talks to the reader; however, it remains in the third person as opposed to using the second person.

A list of good phrases and verbs for ways of avoiding: **"I decided to" or "I interviewed"** and turning it into:

- "the author interviewed..." or "it was decided to"
- "The conclusion that was found"
- "The interview with X revealed that"
- "As X confirms, [QUOTE HERE]"
- Or simply write, "In an interview, Professor Simons said..." or "when interviewed, Professor Simons admitted..."
- " You could also just leave out the interview part and write, "Professor Simons said..."