

How to Avoid Using First Person Point of View in Academic Writing

First, Second and Third Person Point of View

First person is often used in personal narrative – when the writer is telling a story or relating an experience. This perspective is the writer’s point of view, and the writer becomes the focal point.

First person pronouns: *I, we, me, us, my, mine, our, and ours.*

Examples of first person point of view:

- I went to the lake with my family last summer, and we swam all day.
- We went to Europe for a class trip when I was in grade six.
- Our car broke down, costing us a thousand dollars in repairs.
- Ours is the blue house on the corner and my room is on the top floor.

Second person is rarely used in fiction, but is often found in speeches, letters, and other forms of non-fiction. It is used to address the reader directly.

Second person pronouns: *you, and your.*

Examples of second person point of view:

- You may be interested to hear how I won the track meet at school.
- There is no way of knowing how you will react to the information I have to give to your group.

Third person is a flexible narrative device and is often used in fiction, non-fiction, and academic writing. It is used when someone else is being spoken about or referred to. The author is not a character in the story or paper, but rather as an unspecified, unnamed narrator conveying information.

Third person pronouns: *She, he, it, they, them and their.*

Examples of third person point of view:

- In this article, they argued that the literacy rates in Canada were dropping.
- She identifies obesity as the leading cause of heart failure in North America.
- There is no denying the effect he has had on history.

Objectivity in Academic Writing

Academic writing is formal in tone and meant to be objective, using cited sources to support an argument or position. This assumes the focus is not the author, but rather the writing (“this essay”, “this report”, “this literature review”).

Examples of objective statements supported by fact:

“Research suggests that...” “Authors Smith and Kline (2012) argue...”

The first person point of view is considered informal, and is not encouraged in academic writing. First person can appear to weaken the credibility of the writer in research and argument, as it reads as the writer’s personal opinion.

Examples of personal opinion:

“I believe...” “I think...” “In my opinion...” “I would say that...”

The third person point of view is often used as an alternative to first person as the “voice” in academic writing.

Examples of using effective alternatives to first person:

- Original example: I am writing this paper to discuss how I believe climate change is a major problem. (1st person)
- Stronger example: Climate change is a significant issue and over time may result in glaciers melting and the accelerated rise of sea level. (3rd person)

The original example presents a personal opinion of climate change with no supporting facts. The stronger example is more assertive and direct, supporting the claim that “climate change is a significant issue” with facts that can be cited.

- Original example: I was reading a study about the rise of feudalism in medieval Europe, and I noticed that social class structure seemed to be clearly determined. (1st person)
- Stronger: This study about the rise of feudalism in medieval Europe reveals that social class structure was clearly determined. (3rd person)

The original example focuses on the reader of the study, whereas the stronger example refers directly to the study and its findings.

Some general examples for changing first person to third person:

First person

I argue
We researched the issue
I used structured interviews
As my methodology points out
I found that

Third person

The report argues
The group researched the issue
The chosen methodology was
In the structured interviews
It was found that

Being Specific in Academic Writing

When using third person pronouns (she, he, it, and they) in your writing, it can confuse the reader if these pronouns are used near the beginning of a sentence. A good practice is to replace the pronoun with a noun, identifying specifically what is being talked about.

Examples:

- The authors argued that... (rather than “they”)
- The woman interviewed explained... (rather than “she”)
- The truss at the front of the bridge was constructed by... (rather than “it”)

Writing Reflection Papers

A reflection paper is an opportunity to demonstrate your understanding and analysis of the material that you are covering in class or reading, and how it may affect the way you think and practice. They are often written in response to an assigned reading, a lecture, or an experience.

Reflection papers are formal in tone and written using first person singular (*I, me, my, mine*) to convey your own reactions, perceptions and experiences.

Examples:

- I found the article written by Smith and Kline to be very informative...
- I agree with the position that Kline presents...
- As mentioned above, there are a few points in Smith’s article that I disagree with...
- The article allowed me to critically reflect on...
- My interpretation of the information presented is...