

Writing in the Third Person

Voice and personal pronouns

All pieces of writing have a “voice” or point of view, as if someone is talking to the reader.

I, Me, My, We, Our.

- First person: the writer is the subject of the writing.

You, your.

- Second person: the reader is the subject of the writing.

She, he, it, they.

- Someone else is being spoken about.

Academic Writing and Objectivity

The voice you write in is dependent upon the type of writing you are engaged in. Although trends may be changing, you are often required to write in the third person.

Academic writing is formal in tone and is meant to be objective. This means that the focus is on the **writing** rather than the writer, so the voice is “this essay”, “this literature review” or “this report”.

Objectivity requires that the paper you are writing should not be a piece of personal opinion, “I think,” or, “We believe,” but substantiated by research, giving evidence from scholarly works you have read. So you would use phrases such as, “Research suggests that...”, “Smith and Jones (2010) argue that...” “I” and “We” disappear from academic writing.

Here are some examples...

First Person...

- I argue that...
- We researched the issue of...
- I used semi structured interviews as my methodology...
- After this I will analyse topic x...
- I found that...
- We thought the results were...

becomes third person

This essay argues that...
The group researched the issue...
The chosen methodology was semi structured interviews...
Subsequently, topic x will be analysed...
It was found that...
The results appeared to be...

Second person...

- You can read further about this in the work of Smith and Jones (2010) .
- You may find it difficult to replicate this experiment.
- Your reading will be more effective if you have a study plan.

becomes third person

Further discussion of this topic is found in the work of Smith and Jones (2010).
Replication of this experiment may be difficult.
Use of a study plan will improve the effectiveness of one’s reading.

Being Specific

Although personal pronouns such as she, he, it and they *are* writing in the third person, they can confuse the reader if used near the beginning of a sentence.

Try using a noun at the beginning instead:

- The interviewees were... (rather than “they” were).
- The chemical reaction took place straightaway... (rather than “it” took place).
- The staff nurse ensured the wound was... (rather than “she” ensured).

Voice and Tense

Reports, essays and literature reviews tend to be written in the *present* tense, especially in the introductory sections and could incorporate phrases such as:

- This report analyses the...
- This literature review provides an overview and critical analysis of...
- Evidence, therefore, indicates that...

Write methodologies (how you did practical research), results and conclusions in the *past* tense:

- The equipment was calibrated prior to the experiment.
- Tension was applied to the bar and at x force it snapped.
- The results were analysed by...

For types of writing which do encourage the use of the first and second persons please see the information sheet **Reflective Writing**.

Further Reading

- Northedge, A. (2005). *The good study guide*. Milton Keynes: Open University.

External Links

- University of Queensland, Student Services (2010). *Alternatives to Using “I”*, <http://uq.edu.au/student-services/Alternatives+to+I>
- Massey University, OWLL (2010). *1st vs.3rd Person*, <http://owll.massey.ac.nz/academic-writing/1st-vs-3rd-person.php>

Additional learning tools / Sources of information

- See www.griffith.edu.au/library/workshops-training/self-help-resources for further resources to complement this information sheet.