

Academic Writing: Use of the First Person

Can I ever use the first person (“I” / “we”) in academic writing?

Some students are told (and we have also seen this advice on some websites): Never Ever Use the First Person. People who believe this categorically are probably unaware of the wide variety of academic writing styles that exist. It is no longer unusual to find a few “I”s and “we”s within a published piece of academic writing. In his study of 240 published journal articles, Ken Hyland found that most of them used the first person – although there were differences in how various disciplines used it.¹ Because discipline practices and personal attitudes about the use of the first person vary widely, it is best to ask your tutor or course coordinator what he or she prefers, and adapt your writing style to that.

When first person is necessary

Reflective writing: students in Education, Nursing, Psychology and sometimes other disciplines can be given assignments in which they are asked to reflect upon their own personal experience. The first person is normally used in reflective writing. (We have never heard of anyone asking students to refer to themselves pompously as “The author of this essay” in reflective writing.)

When first person might be the right choice

Sometimes the first person plural (“we”) is used in academic writing to mean “the writer and the reader together”. “As we have seen,” or “Let us now look at...” are examples of this, and if not overused, it can make for smooth transitions and style.

Sometimes it is helpful to use a generic first person plural to refer to people in our society today. Tang and John note that “a noun phrase like *the English language that we have today* simply means *the English language that exists today*. Used this way, the first person pronoun, far from giving the reader information about the writer, effectively reduces the writer to a non-entity.”²

In the social sciences, it is increasingly acceptable (although still a matter of debate) to use the first person to indicate your own presence in empirical research. For example, many scholars now feel it is more transparent to state: “I carried out the interviews,” rather than an anonymous and vague “The interviews were carried out”.

¹ Ken Hyland, “Options of identity in academic writing,” *ELT Journal* vol. 56/4 (2002), pgs. 351-358.

² Ramona Tang & Suganthi John, “The ‘I’ in identity: Exploring writer identity in student academic writing through the first person pronoun,” *English for Specific Purposes* vol. 18 (1999), p. S27.

Occasionally it may be relevant to bring your personal experience into an academic essay, in which case you would use the first person. However, unless you have been asked specifically to reflect on your personal experience for the assignment, or unless you have a unique perspective or experience (i.e. knowledge that cannot be found in scholarship), it is far preferable to find examples from scholarly sources in preference to your personal experience. Generally speaking, you are expected to use scholarly sources in your argument (whether in support of your argument or the contrary) rather than anecdotal evidence.

When first person is probably the wrong choice

Phrases such as “I think” and “it seems to me” aren’t generally necessary, because you are the author of the assignment. Everything you have written, except for acknowledged paraphrases and quotations from others’ work, is your considered thought on the matter. So there is no need to state this explicitly. (However, don’t worry if your *drafts* are peppered with “I think”s – just remember to take them out later! See examples that follow.)

Scientific writing, for the most part, does not need to use the first person. “The levels of chlorine were checked” [passive voice] is more appropriate than “I checked the levels of chlorine”. However, it may sometimes be necessary to specify who did what in a scientific piece of writing, in which case the first person (“we” “our” / “I” “my”) is used for clarity: “Our group decided to measure chlorine, sodium and bromine. I measure the levels of chlorine each morning.” It may be important to use the first person to clarify who did what, especially if the writer has done some research as part of a team and some research of his or her own.

How do I say what I think without using “I”?

This is a question we are often asked by students. It is a good question, to which there are many possible answers.

Example One

Let’s suppose that your first draft of your introduction looks a bit like this:

In the first part of the essay, I will look at what the prescribed gender roles were in the 1920s. Then I will argue that what happened when Evangeline went out to work was that she found she loved working outside of the home. Finally, I will examine the reaction of her husband Lester to becoming a “househusband” due to his injury.

The repetition of “I” is a bit bothersome here. You could change some of the “I”s to “we” (to mean “the writer and the reader together”), and not spell out all of what your argument is going to be in sentence 2.

In the first part of the essay, **we will look at** what the prescribed gender roles were in the 1920s. Then **we will consider** what happened when Evangeline went out to work. Finally, **we will examine** the reaction of her husband Lester to becoming a “househusband” due to his injury.

Using “we” softens the annoyance of constantly repeating “I” – but you might find using “we” three times in three sentences a bit annoying as well! So you could combine sentence 2 and three using a present participle (verb ending with –ing), which has no specified subject (no “I” “we” “he” “she” etc.) You can only do this if the subject of the –ing verb is perfectly clear from the context, however.

In the first part of the essay, **we will look at** what the prescribed gender roles were in the 1920s. Then **we will consider** what happened when Evangeline went out to work, **before finally examining** the reaction of her husband Lester to becoming a “househusband” due to his injury.

But let’s say you don’t want to use “we” at all. One option is to refer to the piece of writing itself as the subject of the verb (the “person” doing the examining, looking at, considering, etc.):

This essay firstly looks at what the prescribed gender roles were in the 1920s. Then **it considers** what happened when Evangeline went out to work. Finally, **it examines** the reaction of her husband Lester to becoming a “househusband” due to his injury.

Example Two

When editing the main body of your essay, it will probably be easier to eliminate use of the first person. Let us suppose your draft looks like this:

I think that the reason *The Home-Maker* is still a popular novel is that even now, almost a century later, we are constrained by gender roles and expectations. I’m not saying that mothers don’t work outside of the home – many do – but I can’t imagine there are many men whose full-time occupation is bringing up their children. I think the most interesting aspect of the novel for a contemporary reader is the insight it gives us into the character of Lester, who finds becoming the “home-maker” a very liberating, and I believe, creative job.

Here we want to take out the “I think,” “I’m not saying” “I can’t imagine” and “I believe” – because it makes the writing sound too informal, if not a bit apologetic. So let’s look at each sentence:

1. I think that the reason *The Home-Maker* is still a popular novel is that even now, almost a century later, we are constrained by gender roles and expectations.

You can easily take out “I think that” and the sentence will stand on its own perfectly well:

The reason *The Home-Maker* is still a popular novel is that even now, almost a century later, we are constrained by gender roles and expectations.

If you want to get rid of “we,” you could replace that part of the sentence by something like “modern society still has many gender roles and expectations”.

2. I'm not saying that mothers don't work outside of the home – many do – but I can't imagine there are many men whose full-time occupation is bringing up their children.

Here we want to take out “I'm not saying that” and “I can't imagine”. We can replace “I'm not saying” with something like “It is not that...” The phrase “I can't imagine there are...” may need some stronger action. The phrase indicates that you the writer are making a guess. We would recommend trying to find out what the scholarly research says about how many men have the full-time occupation of bringing up their children, and giving a reference. One last change you definitely want to make is to get rid of the contraction “don't”. So you might have a revised sentence that looks something like this:

It is not that mothers do not work outside of the home – many do – but **as the research of Smith (2009) shows, only 3% of British men** have bringing up their children as their full-time occupation.

3. I think the most interesting aspect of the novel for a contemporary reader is the insight it gives us into the character of Lester, who finds becoming the “home-maker” a very liberating, and I believe, creative job.

As in the first sentence, you can take out “I think” without making further changes. The same is true of “I believe”. You can also take out “us” without any further changes (or you could use “one”):

The most interesting aspect of the novel for a contemporary reader is the insight it gives into the character of Lester, who finds becoming the “home-maker” a very liberating and creative job.

Now compare the original draft with one possible revised version that eliminates first person:

Draft:

I think that the reason *The Home-Maker* is still a popular novel is that even now, almost a century later, we are constrained by gender roles and expectations. I'm not saying that mothers don't work outside of the home – many do – but I can't imagine there are many men whose full-time occupation is bringing up their children. I think the most interesting aspect of the novel for a contemporary reader is the insight it gives us into the character of Lester, who finds becoming the “home-maker” a very liberating, and I believe, creative job.

Revised version:

The reason *The Home-Maker* is still a popular novel is that even now, almost a century later, modern society still has many gender roles and expectations. It is not that mothers do not work outside of the home – many do – but as the research of Smith (2009) shows, only 3% of British men have bringing up their children as their full-time occupation. The most interesting aspect of the novel for a contemporary

reader is the insight it gives into the character of Lester, who finds becoming the “home-maker” a very liberating and creative job.

We think that you will agree the second version is far more confident and academic, although there is only one instance where we have added an actual reference to an outside source. The writer’s argument comes out clearly here.