

Use of the First Person in Academic Writing

Stereotypes

Students are often taught that they should not use authorial pronouns (I, we, me, us, my, our) in academic texts to maintain objectivity. Although good science strives to be objective, pronouns do not create this objectivity. Instead, it is the quality of your research and data that make your science objective. **Academic writing is NOT**

- **impersonal.** Writers and researchers have identities. They do NOT achieve objectivity through rhetorical invisibility.
- **uniform** across disciplines and genres. Disciplines have different conventions as to the usage of first-person pronouns.

Ken Hyland (2002) examined 240 journal papers from eight disciplines, including STEM, and discovered that the majority of authors employed the first person, but there were variations depending on the discipline. More recent corpus studies show that academic writers are moving away from the non-I/we style by using first-person pronouns, for example, to show their stance and engagement.

The usage of first-person pronouns in academic writing depends on the situation, genre (proposals vs. papers), and culture of your discipline. Yet, **I/we can be used** to bring in more clarity or do away with nominalization and bulky usage of the passive voice. In general, active voice sentences are clearer and more concise.

Use First-Person Pronouns Correctly

Ask yourself:

- Do I/we want to stress my/our role in a study? Is it important to indicate, for example, who performed an experiment or interviewed the subjects?

Example 1: *“To determine the preferred water molecule binding sites of the polybasic sulfa drugs sulfamethoxazole (SMX) and sulfisoxazole (SIX), **we have studied** their monomers and monohydrated complexes through laser-desorption conformer-specific UV and IR spectroscopy.”* (The answer is “yes.”)

Example 2: *“UV excitation spectra were recorded through one-color resonant two-photon ionization (1C-R2PI) spectroscopy”* (Uhlemann et al., 2018). (“The object of research – “spectra” – is more important than the doers. “We” would have referred to all authors and co-researchers.)

- Do I/we want to stress that my/our position on the issue differs from that of other thinkers?

Example: *“Comparing the structure of the assigned conformer i-a1 with the crystal structure of the only SIX polymorph for which X-ray data are available, **we note that** both the gas-phase structure and the solid-state structure are amido conformers exhibiting staggered sulfonamide groups” (Uhlemann et al., 2018).*

Avoid

- making assumptions that your readers share your point of view by using “we” to refer to “the writer and the reader.” Examples may include “as we have seen,” “let us now examine,” or “our society.” By describing society as “our,” you are excluding the readers who might not belong to your societal group.
- using the third-person pronouns and the passive voice to describe what you think or believe (in writing about your thinking, or metadiscourse). Example: *Not “it is argued,” but “we argue.” Not “it is shown,” but “The results show.”*

How do I say it without “I/we”?

- To stress that your research rather than you is the focus, you can replace the first-person pronoun with a noun, for example, *“research suggests,” “the findings indicate,” “the authors argue that,” “the analysis suggests,” “the survey results demonstrate,” etc.*
- Use the passive voice if appropriate. Two appropriate contexts are moving the emphasis away from the actor to the action and object or creating cohesion in a paragraph.

References

Hyland, K. (2002). Options of identity in academic writing. *ELT Journal*, 56(4), 351–358. <https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/56.4.351>

Uhlemann, T., Seidel, S., & Müller, C. W. (2018). Site-specific binding of a water molecule to the sulfa drugs sulfamethoxazole and sulfisoxazole: A laser-desorption isomer-specific UV and IR study. *Physical Chemistry Chemical Physics*, 20(10), 6891–6904. <https://doi.org/10.1039/c7cp08579f>

Further Reading

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Schimmel, J. (2012). *Writing science. How to write papers that get cited and proposals that get funded*. Oxford University Press.

Williams, J. M. (2009). *Style: Toward clarity and grace*. Univ. of Chicago Press.

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