# "I need you to say 'I'": Why First Person Is Important in College Writing

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At this point in your development as a writer, you may have learned to write "I-less" prose, without first person.* I-less-ness is fine; writing habits, like all habits, are best simplified when first learned or re-learned. Jazz pianists learn strict scales before they are allowed to improvise. Someone might go on a strict diet and then return to a modified menu after the desired weight is lost, and the bad eating habits are broken. Constructing arguments without using "I" is good practice for formal "improvisation" at higher levels of thinking and writing. Avoiding personal pronouns forces you to be objective. It also "sounds" more formal; you're more likely to maintain an appropriate tone if you stay away from the personal.

But writing in various academic and professional contexts needs to be more flexible, sophisticated, and subtle than writing for high school English classes. In college, you should start using first-person pronouns in your formal academic writing, where appropriate. First person has an important place—an irreplaceable place—in texts that report research and engage scholarship. Your choices about where you place yourself as subject are largely determined by context and the

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conventions of the field in which you're writing. The key is making sure that your choices are appropriate for the context of your paper—whom you're writing it for, and the kind of information it's meant to communicate. Here I'll list some ways in which first person improves written argument and show you some examples of the ways scholars use first person, and then I'll propose places where it might be used appropriately in your own writing.

## Why "I"?

First person can support the following characteristics of good written argument (and good writing in general).

### 1. Objectivity and Integrity

The main reason most teachers give for the discipline of I-less-ness is that it keeps your writing "objective." They want to make sure that you don't rely on personal experiences or perspectives where you should be providing concrete, researched support for your arguments. Your best friend at summer camp doesn't "prove" a sociological theory. Your memory of a "fact"—the average rainfall in a town, the actions of a character in a film, the tendencies of groups of people to behave in certain ways, or the population of Kenya—is not a reliable source in academic contexts. You shouldn't write, "because I think so," or "I know that . . ." But if you consider some of the higher-level implications of perspective's effects on argument, there are some well-chosen places where "I" can give your argument more objectivity and intellectual integrity.

Take scientific writing, for example. Up until very recently, when writing observational and experimental reports, scientists, as a rule, avoided first person. Methodology was (and is still, in many cases) described in the passive voice. That is, instead of writing, "We took measurements of ice thickness on the first and 15$^{th}$ day of every month," scientists wrote, "Measurements of ice thickness were taken on the first and 15$^{th}$ day of every month." Taking out the "we" focuses the reader's attention on the phenomenon (object) being observed, not the observer taking the readings (subject). Or at least that was the reasoning behind passive voice in science writing.

But during the last half of the last century, mostly because of developments in physics, scientists have talked a lot about a thing called the "observer effect": while observing or experimenting with a social or even physical system, the scientist watching can affect the system's behavior. When particle physicists try to measure the motion of something as tiny as an electron, their very observation almost certainly changes that motion. Because of the observer effect, the passive voice convention I've described above has been called into question. Is it really honest to act like "measurements are taken" by some invisible hand? Is the picture minus the researcher the whole picture? Not really. The fact is, someone took the measurements, and those measurements might reflect that observer's involvement. It's more truthful, complete, and objective, then, to put the researchers in the picture. These days, it's much more common to "see" the researchers as subjects—"We measured ice thickness . . ."—in methodology sections.

That same kind of "whole picture" honesty applies to you making written claims, too. When you first learned to write an essay, you were probably taught to make claims as though they were true; write "The sky is blue," not "I think that the sky is blue." That second claim isn't arguable—who can disprove that you think something? But a much more sophisticated claim includes your perspective and implies the effect it may have on your stance: "From my position standing on the earth's surface in the daytime, I see the sky as blue." You can make that claim without using first person, of course, and in some contexts (i.e. for a scientific argument), you probably should. When you're taking a stance on an issue, though, first person just makes sense. Defining your perspective gives your reader context for your stance: "As a volunteer at a bilingual preschool, I can see that both language immersion and individualized language instruction have benefits," or "As a principal at an elementary school with a limited budget, I would argue that language immersion makes the most sense." Consider those two positions; without the "whole picture" that the statement of perspective implies, you might assume that the two claims disagree. The subtlety of the subject—who the writer is—lets you see quite a bit about why the claim is being made. If you asked the second writer to take a stance on the immersion/bilingual instruction issue with only learning objectives in mind, she might agree with the first writer. The "truth" might not be different, but the position it's observed from can certainly cast a different light on it.

## 2. Clarifying Who's Saying What

A clear description of your perspective becomes even more important when your stance has to incorporate or respond to someone else's. As you move into more advanced college writing, the claims you respond to will usually belong to scholars. Some papers may require you to spend almost as much time summarizing a scholarly conversation as they do presenting points of your own. By "signification," I mean little phrases that tell the reader, "This is my opinion," "This is my interpretation." You need them for two big reasons.

First of all, the more "voices" you add to the conversation, the more confusing it gets. You must separate your own interpretations of scholars' claims, the claims themselves, and your argument so as not to misrepresent any of them. If you've just paraphrased a scholar, making your own claim without quite literally claiming it might make the reader think that the scholar said it. Consider these two sentences: "Wagstaff et al. (2007) conclude that the demand for practical science writing that the layperson can understand is on the rise. But there is a need for laypeople people to increase their science literacy, as well." Is that second claim part of Wagstaff's conclusion, or is it your own reflection on the implications of Wagstaff's argument? By writing something like, "Wagstaff et al. (2007) conclude that the demand for practical science that the layperson can understand is on the rise. I maintain that there is a need for laypeople to increase their science literacy, as well," you avoid the ambiguity. First person can help you express, very simply, who "says" what.

Secondly, your perceptions, and therefore your interpretations, are not always perfect. Science writing can help me illustrate this idea, as well. In the imaginary observation report I refer to above, the researchers may or may not use first person in their methodology section out of respect for the observer effect, but they are very likely to use first person in the discussion/conclusion section. The discussion section involves interpretation of the data—that is, the researchers must say what they think the data means. The importance of perspective is compounded, here. They might not be right. And even if they are mostly right, the systems scientists study are usually incredibly complex; one observation report is not the whole picture. Scientists, therefore, often mark their own interpretations with first person pronouns. "We interpret these data to imply . . ." they might say, or, "We believe

these findings indicate . . . ," and then they go on to list questions for further research. Even the experts know that their understanding is almost always incomplete.

3. Ownership, Intellectual Involvement, and Exigency

Citing scholarship contextualizes and strengthens your argument; you want to defer to "experts" for evidence of your claims when you can. As a student, you might feel like an outsider—unable to comment with authority on the concepts you're reading and writing about. But outsider status doesn't only mean a lack of expertise. Your own, well-defined viewpoint might shed new light on a topic that the experts haven't considered (or that your classmates haven't considered, or that your professor hasn't mentioned in class, or even, quite simply, that you hadn't thought of and so you're excited about). In that case, you want to say, "This is mine, it's a new way of looking at the issue, and I'm proud of it."

Those kinds of claims are usually synthetic ones—you've put information and/or interpretations from several sources together, and you've actually got something to say. Whether your new spin has to do with a cure for cancer or an interpretation of Batman comics, pride in your own intellectual work is important on many levels. As a student, you should care; such investment can help you learn. Your school community should also care; good teachers are always looking for what we call "critical thinking," and when students form new ideas from existing ones, we know it's happening. On the larger scale, the scholarly community should care. Having something new to say increases the exigency of your argument in the larger, intellectual exchange of ideas. A scholarly reader should want to pay attention, because what you say may be a key to some puzzle (a cure for cancer) or way of thinking about the topic (interpreting Batman). That's the way scholars work together to form large bodies of knowledge: we communicate about our research and ideas, and we try to combine them when we can.

An emphatic statement like "Much discussion has addressed the topic of carbon emissions' relationship to climate change, but I would like to ask a question from a new perspective," will make your reader sit up and take notice. In I-less form, that might look like: "Much discussion has addressed the topic of carbon emissions' relationship to climate change, but some questions remain unconsidered." In this

case, second sentence still sounds like summary—the writer is telling us that research is incomplete, but isn't giving us a strong clue that his or her (new! fresh!) argument is coming up next. Be careful, of course, not to sound arrogant. If the writer of the sentences above was worried about his or her lack of expertise in an assignment involving scholarly sources, he or she could write: "What scholarly discussion I have read so far has addressed the topic of carbon emissions' relationship to climate change, but I would like to ask a question from a new perspective." He or she can use first person to employ both deference and ownership/involvement in the same sentence.

4. Rhetorical Sophistication

Some writing assignments focus on one simple task at a time: "Summarize the following . . ." "Compare the readings . . ." "analyze," or "argue." When you write a simple five-paragraph essay, your mode rarely changes—you can write an introduction, thesis, body, and conclusion without explaining too many shifts in what the paper is "doing." Writing at the college level and beyond often has to "do" a few things in the same text. Most involved writing assignments expect you to do at least two things. You may need to summarize/report and respond, or (more likely) you'll need to summarize/report, synthesize, and respond. A good introduction, as you've learned, needs to anticipate all of it so the reader knows what to expect. Anticipating the structure of a complex argument in I-less mode is tricky. Often, it comes out as a summary of the document that follows and is redundant. First person can clear that problem right up. Consider the introduction to this article; when I come to the part where I need to tell you what I'm going to do, I just . . . tell you what I'm going to do! My writing students usually find this rhetorical trick (or is it an un-trick?) refreshing and liberating. The same concept can be applied to transitions between sections and ideas: "Now that I've done this thing, I'd like to move into this other part of my argument . . ." I'll use this type of transition, myself, when I move into the section of this text called, "When, and When not?"

Academic Examples

The fact is, using first person for rhetorical clarity and to ease transitions isn't just easier—it's common in many academic contexts. It's

accepted, even expected, in some cases, for scholarly writing such as abstracts, position papers, theses, and dissertations in many fields to employ first person in the ways I've just described. In almost all genres, formats, and fields, the scholarly writer is expected to describe the research done thus far by her peers and then make her own claims—a structure that lends itself to first person.

Robert Terrill, a cultural studies scholar, begins his article, "Put on a Happy Face: Batman as Schizophrenic Savior," with an evaluation of Tim Burton's movie's box office success, and then spends several paragraphs discussing other scholars' applications of psychological frameworks to film studies. Throughout the literature review section, Terrill's own voice stays remote; he uses third person. But look at what happens when he is ready to begin his own argument:

> Because much of my analysis is grounded in the theories of Carl C. Jung, I will begin by outlining relevant aspects of that theory. Then I suggest that Gotham City is a dream world, a representative projection of image-centered dreams. Within the framework of Jung's model, I show the principal characters to be archetypal manifestations that erupt from Gotham's unconscious. Wayne/Batman is a splintered manifestation of a potential whole; his condition represents the schizophrenia required of a hero dedicated to preservation of the shattered psyche of Gotham. (321)

Terrill's move to first person separates his own claims from the scholars he's summarized in his introduction, and it allows him to take ownership of his main claim. The way he "maps out" his article is also typical of academic argument.

First person is used similarly in the sciences. Unlike Terrill, who argues for a certain interpretation of a text, psychologists Jennifer Kraemer and David Marquez report research findings in their article, "Psychosocial Correlates and Outcomes of Yoga or Walking Among Older Adults." Much like Terrill, however, their introduction consists of a review of literature in the third person. For almost three pages, Kraemer and Marquez describe studies which have explored health and injury patterns in old age, as well as studies which have investigated various fitness programs for the elderly. When it comes time for

Kraemer and Marquez to describe their own study, they shift into first person:

> We hypothesized that an acute bout of yoga would be more effective at improving mood and reducing state anxiety among older adults when compared with acute bouts of walking. We further hypothesized that older adults who practice yoga would have lower levels of depression and higher quality of life when compared with those who walk for exercise. We did not make direct hypotheses for exercise barriers and barriers self-efficacy because, to date, there is no research that has examined those variables in this population. (393)

Kraemer and Marquez continue in first person as they describe their methodology. "We recruited a total of 51 participants (8 men, 43 women)" they write, "through classes at local yoga studios and mall walking groups" (393). The researchers themselves, in first person, are the subjects who "do" every action in the methods: "We asked questions on . . . We measured state anxiety by . . . We measured mood using . . ."(393–4). By putting themselves in the picture, Kraemer and Marquez acknowledge themselves as variables in their own study—a key aspect of any scientific methodology, and especially those which involve human subjects and use interviews to collect data.

On the other hand, some academic communities and genres stay away from first person. Susan Clark, a professor at Yale who writes about the communication and implementation of sustainable forestry practices, describes her study without putting herself in the picture. Where Kraemer and Marquez describe themselves "doing" the methods of their study, Clark has her article as the agent in her description of analysis:

> This article (a) describes the intelligence function in conceptual terms, including its sequential phases (as described by McDougal, Lasswell, & Reisman, 1981); (b) uses examples to illustrate the intelligence activity from Reading and Miller (2000), *Endangered Animals: A Reference Guide to Conflicting Issues,* which gives 70 cases by 34 authors in 55 countries

> that focus on species, ecosystem, and sustainability challenges; and employs a "problem-oriented" look at intelligence activities across all these cases (Lasswell, 1971). It does so by asking and answering five questions . . . (637)

Clark's methods are to analyze others' processes—hers, then, is meta-analysis. It's appropriate for her to remove herself rhetorically as she deals with many actions and many, diverse actors. She is more a describer than a "do-er."

At the very end of her article, in a "call to action" that directly applies her findings, Clark does finally use first person. "We can increase the possibility of better biodiversity and ecosystem conservation, and better sustainability overall," she writes, "if we choose to use an effective intelligence activity. Success is more likely if we increase the rationality of our own directed behavior" (659). Clark's "we" is different from Kraemer and Marquez's "we," though. It refers to Clark's audience—the community of sustainable forestry as a whole—and predicts future action in which she will be active.

## When (and When Not) to Use First Person?

Now that I've convinced you to try first person in some of your academic writing, I should talk about how to use it appropriately. (See? I just used "I" for a clear transition to a new idea.) The key is: don't go "I" crazy. Remember the self-discipline you practiced with I-less writing.

Probably the best way to approach first person in an academic context is this: use it to make yourself clear. You'll need "I" for clarity when one of the ideals I described above is in question. Either 1) you'll need to describe an aspect of your personal perspective that will help the reader see (your) whole picture; 2) you'll need to make the divide between your voice and the scholars' as clear as possible in order to avoid misrepresenting the scholars' claims; 3) your own claim will need to stand apart from the other perspectives you've presented as something new; or 4) you'll need to guide your reader through the organization of your text in some way.

Below, I've listed a few common writing situations/assignments that first person can potentially support.

Try "I" when . . .

. . . the assignment asks you to. Personal position papers, personal narratives, and assignments that say "tell what you did/read and provide your reaction," all explicitly ask you to use first person.
. . . you're asked to "Summarize and respond." You might transition into the response part of the paper with "I."
. . . you're introducing a paper with a complicated structure: "I will summarize Wagstaff's argument, and then respond to a few key points with my own interpretation."
. . . you are proud of and intellectually invested in what you have to say, and you want to arrange it in reference to others' voices: "Many scholars have used psychological frameworks to interpret the Batman movies, but I would argue that a historical perspective is more productive . . ."
. . . you are unsure of your interpretation of a source, or you feel that the claim you're making may be bigger than your level of expertise: "If I read Wagstaff correctly, her conclusions imply . . ."

"I" Is a Bad Idea When . . .

. . . you use it only once. You don't want to overuse the first person, but if you're going to assert your position or make a transition with "I," give the reader a hint of your voice in the introduction. An introduction that anticipates structure with "I will," for instance, works well with transitions that use "I" as well. If you use first person only once, the tone shift will jar the reader.
. . . The assignment is a simple summary. In that case, you need only report; you are "eye," not "I."
. . . you're writing a lab report for a science class, as a general rule. But you might ask your teacher about the issues of objectivity I've addressed above, especially in terms of objective methodology.