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Using First Person in an Academic Essay: When is It Okay?

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Many times, high school students are told not to use first person (“I,” “we,” “my,” “us,” and so forth) in their essays. As a college student, you should realize that this is a rule that can and should be broken—at the right time, of course.

By now, you’ve probably written a personal essay, memoir, or narrative that used first person. After all, how could you write a personal essay about yourself, for instance, without using the dreaded “I” word?

However, academic essays differ from personal essays; they are typically researched and use a formal tone. Because of these differences, when students write an academic essay, they quickly shy away from first person because of what they have been told in high school or because they believe that first person feels too informal for an intellectual, researched text. Yet while first person can definitely be overused in academic essays (which is likely why your teachers tell you not to use it), there are moments in a paper when it is not only appropriate, but it is actually effective and/or persuasive to use first person. The following are a few instances in which it is appropriate to use first person in an academic essay:

- Including a personal anecdote:** You have more than likely been told that you need a strong “hook” to draw your readers in during an introduction. Sometimes, the best hook is a personal anecdote, or a short amusing story about yourself. In this situation, it would seem unnatural not to use first-person pronouns such as “I” and “myself.” Your readers will appreciate the personal touch and will want to keep reading! (For more information about incorporating personal anecdotes into your writing, see [“Employing Narrative in an Essay \(/open-text/genres/academic-writing/literary-criticism/558-employing-narrative-in-an-essay\).”](#))
- Establishing your credibility (ethos):** Ethos is a term stemming back to Ancient Greece that essentially means “character” in the sense of trustworthiness or credibility. A writer can establish her ethos by convincing the reader that she is trustworthy source. Oftentimes, the best way to do that is to get personal—tell the reader a little bit about yourself. (For more information about ethos, see [“Ethos \(/open-text/information-literacy/rhetorical-analysis/rhetorical-appeals/585-ethos\).”](#))

For instance, let’s say you are writing an essay arguing that dance is a sport. Using the occasional personal pronoun to let your audience know that you, in fact, are a classically trained dancer—and have the muscles and scars to prove it—goes a long way in establishing your credibility and proving your argument. And this use of first person will not distract or annoy your readers because it is purposeful.

- Clarifying passive constructions:** Often, when writers try to avoid using first person in essays, they end up creating confusing, passive sentences.

For instance, let’s say I am writing an essay about different word processing technologies, and I want to make the point that I am using Microsoft Word to write this essay. If I tried to avoid first-person pronouns, my sentence might read: “Right now, this essay is being written in Microsoft Word.” While this sentence is not wrong, it is what we call passive—the subject of the sentence is being acted upon because there is no one performing the action. To most people, this sentence sounds better: “Right now, I am writing this essay in Microsoft Word.” Do you see the difference? In this case, using first person makes your writing clearer.

- Stating your position in relation to others:** Sometimes, especially in an argumentative essay, it is necessary to state your opinion on the topic. Readers want to know where you stand, and it is sometimes helpful to assert yourself by putting your own opinions into the essay. You can imagine the passive sentences (see above) that might occur if you try to state your argument without using the word “I.” The key here is to use first person sparingly. Use personal pronouns enough to get your point across clearly without inundating your readers with this language.

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