

# Writing in the Third Person

## Voice and personal pronouns

All pieces of writing have a 'voice' or point of view. Personal pronouns help to direct the reader in locating the subject of the writing.

|                                  |   |
|----------------------------------|---|
| <b><i>I, me, my, we, our</i></b> | First person: the writer is the subject           |
| <b><i>You, your</i></b>          | Second person: the reader is the subject          |
| <b><i>She, he, it, they</i></b>  | Third person: Someone else is being spoken about. |

## Objectivity in academic writing

The voice you use depends upon the type of writing you are doing. Unless you are told otherwise, academic writing is generally written in the third person. Academic writing is also 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 you adopt 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, which is identifiable by words such as "I think," or "We believe." Academic writing is substantiated by research, and you provide evidence for your view or position on a topic 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.

## Examples

| First person...  | Becomes third person                                     |
|--|--|
| I argue that...  | This essay argues that...                                |
| We researched the issue of...                          | The group researched the issue...                        |
| I used semi-structured interviews as my methodology... | The chosen methodology was semi-structured interviews... |
| After this I will analyse topic x...                   | Subsequently, topic x will be analysed...                |
| We thought the results were...                         | The results appeared to be...                            |

| Second person  | Becomes third person   |
|--|--|
| You can read further about this in the work of Smith and Jones (2010). | Further discussion of this topic is found in the work of Smith and Jones (2010). |
| You may find it hard to replicate this experiment.                     | Replication of this experiment may be difficult.                                 |
| Your reading will be more effective if you have a study plan.          | 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.



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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

Tense expresses time, referring to the moment in which an action takes place. The main tenses in English include the past, present, and future. Academic reports, essays and literature reviews tend to be written in the **present tense**, especially in the introductory sections.

These 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...

## Related helpsheets

- Tenses
- Writing in an Academic Style
- University Speak
- Incorporating Evidence



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