

## Pronoun Usage

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Use plural forms for general statements to avoid sexist language, the ungrammatical use of “they,” and awkward “he or she” combinations.

**Before:** When **an engineer** writes well, **he** increases **his** credibility and ability to communicate effectively with **his** clients and colleagues.

**After:** When **engineers** write well, **they** increase **their** credibility and ability to communicate effectively with **their** clients and colleagues.

Be consistent; avoid shifting between plural to singular pronouns and references.

**Before:** Prior to testing, **the participant** granted **his/her** informed consent. **They** were aware of **their** participation and publication in this study. Upon consent to participate, **the participant** agreed to provide feedback on my draft set of instructions. **The user** was told strictly to follow the instructions given (i.e. **he/she** could not input any of **their** previous knowledge of document design.)

**After:** Prior to testing, **the participant** granted **her** informed consent. **She was** aware of **her** participation and publication in this study. Upon consent to participate, **the participant** agreed to provide feedback on my draft set of instructions. **She** was told strictly to follow the instructions given (i.e. **she** could not input any of **her** previous knowledge of page design.)

**Note:** *This example was adapted (with permission) from a student’s research report. It is fine to use the singular pronouns (e.g., she, her) because doing so does not reveal the participant’s identity.*

**Check all uses of “this,” “it,” and “they” in your writing.** If any of these pronouns are unclear or potentially ambiguous, rewrite your sentence. One strategy is to add a word after “this” to increase clarity and precision. Here are a few examples of poorly used pronouns. Think about how you could revise these sentences.

**Before:** High taxes are a problem for small businesses. To encourage entrepreneurship, **they** must fix this problem. [Who is “they”?]

By increasing university tuition, **it** restricts access to higher education.  
[What does “it” refer to? Who or what is increasing university tuition?]

His research focuses on reducing power loss in transmission lines. **This** is . . .  
[this phenomenon? this loss of power? this research?]

**After:** *How would you fix the sentences above?*

**In academic writing, avoid using “you.”** (The pronoun “you” can work well in business correspondence, marketing materials, and instructions.)

**Before:** Nurses know that **you** should immediately report medication errors.

**After:** Nurses know that **they** should immediately report medication errors.

## First-Person Pronouns (I, me, my)

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In academic essays, avoid first-person pronouns (I, me, my, we, us, our) when they do not serve a useful purpose. When making a statement in an academic essay, avoid adding tags like “In my view,” “I think,” and “In my opinion.” These phrases typically result in wordiness and weaken your arguments by downplaying the evidence supporting your claims. Unless you refer to a source when making a statement, readers understand that the claims presented in your papers represent your reasoned views.

### When to use first-person pronouns in academic writing

- a. when writing personal reflections or discussing your own experiences
- b. when writing a proposal explaining your research plan
- c. for clarity when you need to distinguish between your ideas and those of a source
- d. when you want to avoid anthropomorphism (the illogical attribution of human actions to inanimate objects). For example, rather than writing “This paper concludes that more research is needed,” you could write “I conclude that more research is needed.” Better yet, you could delete unnecessary words and simply write “More research is needed.”
- e. when you are explaining steps you took as a researcher. Rather than write, “The researcher administered a telephone survey,” write “I administered a telephone survey.” (This recommendation aligns with APA guidelines.)

**Before:** In this paper, **I argue that** negative political ads tend to make people more cynical and less likely to vote.

**After:** Negative political ads tend to make people more cynical and less likely to vote.

**In lab reports and other scientific writing**, avoid using first-person pronouns. Use the passive voice construction: “The sample was weighed before and after the reaction.” You could also use a construction that omits the first-person: “After the reaction, the sample weighed 10 grams, the same as before the reaction.” Study articles in your target area to see how and where writers in your field tend to use first-person pronouns.

**Before:** **We** weighed the sample before and after the reaction.

**After:** The sample was weighed before and after the reaction. [passive voice]  
The sample weighed 10 grams both before and after the reaction. [active voice]

**In business letters, memos, and reports**, do not hesitate to use first-person pronouns, but always revise for conciseness.