

Writing in the First Person for Academic and Research Publication

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Abstract

Researchers, academic authors, and journal editors vary in opinion as to whether to write in the first person for formal publication. This review examines guidance from the most influential style guides in three major categories of academic disciplines: social sciences, arts and humanities, and science and engineering. Conclusions are that, in general, writing in the first person with active voice is preferred, resulting in more direct and understandable text; that for any specific instance, the decision of the academic advisor or publication editor is the "correct" approach; and that, when the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association is the guiding style authority, use of first person is specifically prescribed for statements of author action.

Keywords: first person, third person, active voice, passive voice, professional writing

1. INTRODUCTION

Some academic authors seem to avoid use of the first person in formal writing, presumably in an attempt to have research articles maintain an objective tone. At the same time, it is not uncommon to read articles in a wide range of professional journals in which the authors use the first person. Some of those authors who only write in the third person may think that style guides recommend using only third person for formal research writing. However, in several commonly used style guides, that is not the case. The purpose of this paper is to review the position on use of the first person in academic writing in style guidelines for three major categories of academic discipline: social

sciences, arts and humanities, and science and engineering. The style manuals of three professional organizations, the American Psychological Association (APA), the Modern Language Association (MLA), and the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE), are the dominant authors' reference in each broad academic category, respectively: the APA guide for the social sciences, the MLA guide for the arts and humanities, the IEEE guide for science, engineering and technology.

2. Social Sciences: The APA

Used broadly across the social sciences, the sixth edition of the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (APA, 2010)

specifically prescribed use of the first person and active voice by authors, in order to ensure accurate attribution of action. Further, there were numerous examples in the APA manual showing correct use of the first person. APA (2010) included a description of using first person for accurate attribution in Section 3.09, *Precision and Clarity*, noting that use of the third person results in undesirable attribution: "Third person. To avoid ambiguity, use a personal pronoun rather than the third person when describing steps taken in your experiment. Correct: We reviewed the literature. Incorrect: The authors reviewed the literature" (p.69). While proscribing the editorial we, the APA explicitly called for using the first person when referring to the author or coauthors, and when including the authors in a group: "Correct: As behaviorists, we tend to dispute ..." (p. 70). In Section 3.18 of the manual (APA, 2010), the guidance to use first person is included in a discussion on use of active instead of passive voice: "Prefer the active voice. Preferred: We conducted ... Nonpreferred: ... was conducted..." (p. 77).

In addition to specifying use of the first person for clarity of attribution and assuring use of active, rather than passive, voice, the APA 6th edition provided explicit examples of first person writing in other contexts on multiple pages: 43, 48, 54, 57, 58, 63, 64, 80, 81. In an independent interpretation of APA guidelines, Purdue University said it is a common misconception that research writing mandates passive voice, advising authors, "When writing in APA Style, you can use the first person point of view when discussing your research steps ... Use first person to discuss research steps rather than anthropomorphising the work" (Purdue, 2013). Further reinforcing the direct instruction for first person usage and supporting examples in the Manual, the following statement was on the APA Style blog:

I am often asked why APA Style prohibits the use of I or we. I love this question, because the answer is always a pleasant surprise: I or we is perfectly acceptable in APA Style! In fact, the Publication Manual actually recommends using first person, when appropriate, to avoid ambiguity. (McAdoo, 2009)

3. ARTS & HUMANITIES: THE MLA

The Modern Language Association's Handbook for Writers of Research Papers (MLA, 2009) is

silent on whether academic authors should write in the first or third person. However, Purdue's online writing lab provided an annotated sample for MLA-style academic writing (Angeli, 2012) with first person used throughout, and the annotation, "Use personal pronouns (I, we, us, etc.) at your instructor's discretion" (Angeli, p. 2). In contrast, Baker University's MLA guide (Baker, 2010) advised, "Use of the first person 'I' is traditionally seen as a violation of the quest for objectivity. There are, however, exceptions (e.g., qualitative research reports). In any event, the first person should not be overused" (p. 7). Thus, even when discouraging use of the first person when following MLA, Baker acknowledged that first person usage is not forbidden.

4. SCIENCE, ENGINEERING & TECHNOLOGY: THE IEEE

For scientific and technical writing, a widely used style authority is the IEEE Editorial Style Manual (IEEE, 2014). While the IEEE manual addressed citation and reference format, IEEE deferred to The Chicago Manual of Style (University of Chicago, 2003) for usage guidance (IEEE, p. 3). The Chicago Manual focused primarily on correct usage of grammar, syntax, and word form, but did advise, "As a matter of style, passive voice {the matter will be given careful consideration} is typically, though not always, inferior to active voice {we will consider the matter carefully}" (Chicago, p. 177). For further understanding of IEEE advice on use of first person, it is instructive to examine the editorial practice for IEEE journals and magazines. Inspection of the November 2013 issue of the journal *Computer* (IEEE Computer Society, 2013a), revealed use of the first person (I or we) in 14 of 18 articles. Similarly, 10 of 12 articles in the July-August 2015 edition of the IEEE magazine *Security & Privacy* (IEEE Computer Society, 2015) were written in the first person. For IEEE *Security & Privacy*, the relevant guidance is straightforward: "Articles should use active voice instead of passive voice ('We discovered ...' rather than 'It was discovered ...')" (IEEE Computer Society, 2013b). Clearly, the editorial practice for both IEEE journals and magazines is full acceptance, and even specification, of first person writing.

For an expanded discussion on verb person and voice in writing style, I examined the equally widely used manual by Turabian (2007), which incorporates the Chicago Manual usage guidelines, linking Turabian indirectly to the IEEE

style manual. Turabian acknowledged that opinions differ on whether to use the first person in academic writing, but gave useful advice in several parts, summarized by the title of section 11.1.7, "Use First Person Pronouns Appropriately" (p. 116). Turabian advised against overuse, particularly as a narrative form, but declared I or we appropriate when stating an action by the author. That direct action usage agrees with the guidance from APA (2010), discussed in detail above, to use first person for clarity of actor and to prefer active voice. While generally preferring the active voice structure, Turabian acknowledged the importance of context for the decision on first or third person, concluding, "Finally, though, your instructor decides. If he flatly forbids I or we, then so be it" (p. 117).

5. CONCLUSIONS

While academic tradition may have once guided authors to write only in the third person as an indication of objectivity (Baker, 2010), that tradition is no longer universally supported, either in formal guidelines or in practice. Recognized style manuals from three major professional societies, APA, (2010), IEEE (2009), and MLA (2009), either encouraged use of first person when appropriate, or were silent on the subject. None of those references forbade first person or mandated third person usage. Both of the broadly recognized style manuals from the University of Chicago (Chicago, 2003; Turabian, 2007) declared a preference, though not a mandate, for first person writing in active voice. Purdue University's secondary interpretations of both MLA and APA guidelines (Angeli, 2012; Purdue, 2013) further favored first person writing. Current professional publication of journals and magazines (IEEE Computer Society, 2013a, 2013b, & 2015) demonstrated a preference for first person writing. Across several of the cited references on writing style, with a clear exception in the APA's case, the fundamental guidance was that, for specific written products, the instructions of the teacher, adviser, or editor prevail.

For modern academic writing, there is no single correct rule on use of first person. Supervisors of writing projects, whether teachers, advisers, or editors, should in general allow, rather than ban, appropriate use of first person by authors in most situations. By doing so, the preference for active voice can result in more clear, readable, and understandable papers, articles, theses, and books. However, when the writing environment authority (e.g. faculty or editorial board) has

specified the APA manual (APA, 2010) as the official style manual, writing supervisors should not simply allow, but should mandate proper use of first person in order to provide maximum clarity of attribution as well as preference for active voice writing.

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