

USE OF THE FIRST PERSON AND THE PASSIVE¹

"Can I use 'I' in academic writing?" is one of the commonest questions raised by students who have been told at school or university that the first person is not acceptable in university writing. Examination of articles published in journals shows that many researchers in the social sciences do use 'I', yet students often feel uncomfortable copying this strategy. As one PhD student interviewed by Hyland commented: "I have seen 'we' and 'I' in academic papers but it is a good writer, isn't it. They have confidence to give their ideas clearly".² Hyland concludes that although using the first person is "a significant means of promoting a competent scholarly identity and gaining acceptance for one's ideas",³ many students are afraid to do so and thus do not make effective use of the options available to them. So how *can* you use 'I' safely in academic writing?

Ways of using the first person you may want to avoid

First of all, the rules about use of the first person in your own language may not be a good guide when making decisions about English. Particularly Slavic languages tend to replace 'I' with 'we'. This is not customary in English unless a text is being jointly authored, or the audience is being addressed, e.g. "How can we understand this turn of events?". Here 'we' does not refer to the author but to the academic community that author and reader are a part of. Phrases like "in this paper we argue", however, are not usually acceptable in English unless you are writing the paper with someone else.

One reason why teachers may discourage the use of 'I' is because they are tired of seeing phrases like 'I think' and 'in my opinion'. In the social sciences, researchers like to emphasise whenever possible that things are not a matter of opinion, but of claims supported by valid evidence. If you say "I think there is a need for greater fiscal decentralisation in Namibia", the response of the critical reader may be 'I'm not interested in what you think; I'm interested in whether there is evidence that will persuade *me* and others that there is indeed a need for greater fiscal decentralisation in Namibia". Instead of using 'I think' it is more effective to write, "There are three reasons why greater fiscal decentralisation is needed in Namibia. First... Second... Finally...".

Some students like to use phrases like 'I think' because they feel that these soften claims that may not be absolutely true. They feel uncomfortable making such strong statements as "The government has failed to privatise the telecommunications sector effectively". Cautiousness is very common in academic writing, however, it is not usually achieved by using 'I'. Instead, hedging phrases are used such as:

"The government *can be seen* to have failed ..."

"The government *appears* to have failed..."

"The government has *to an extent* failed..."

"It is *questionable to what extent* the government has *succeeded*..."

These hedging phrases allow more sophisticated shades of meaning than the simple use of "I think". The first, for example, is rather stronger than the second, which is stronger than the third or fourth. In this way, you can clearly show your argument and at the same time express caution and admit the existence of other valid views, yet without using the first person.

Ways in which you may wish to use 'I'

One of the commonest reasons for using 'I' in English academic writing is in what is called 'metadiscourse', that is, those parts of your text that talk about how the text is organised and about your purpose. These include phrases like:

"I address this issue in detail below."

"I discuss this further in chapter four."

"My purpose is to examine..."

"I will argue that..."

Of course even in these situations, it is possible to avoid 'I'. One could say:

"This issue is addressed in detail below." (passive)

"Chapter four discusses this issue further" (dummy agent)

"This paper seeks to examine... (dummy agent)

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² Ken Hyland. *Disciplinary Discourses: Social Interactions in Academic Writing*. Harlow: Pearson Education, 2000, 109.

³ Hyland, *ibid*, 111.

“It will be argued that...” (passive)

Some students prefer to use these forms. Generally, this is a matter of personal choice, as both ‘I’ and dummy agents/passives are acceptable in metadiscourse markers in most social science disciplines. Note that this is less true in the hard sciences, however, where I is not normally used and the passive is more common.

Another area in which the use of ‘I’ is common is the description of methodology in empirical research. For example, one researcher describes his methodology as follows:

In addition to the text analyses, *I interviewed* one supervisor from each field (all English L1) and organised small focus groups of student writers (all Cantonese L1). *Participants were asked* to provide information about their own writing and their impressions of disciplinary practices. *I used* a semi-structured format consisting of a series of open-ended interview prompts.⁴

Here again the author switches back and forth between ‘I’ (I interviewed, I used) and a passive form (Participants were asked), but we may assume that he does this for stylistic variety, not out of fear that the first person is inappropriate.

Using the passive

Just as there is extensive debate about whether the first person is too personal, there is debate about whether the passive is too impersonal – a kind of false modesty. You may have noticed that if you switch on the grammar checker in Microsoft Word it will underline all your passive sentences, suggesting you change them into active sentences. First recommendation: switch off the grammar checker.⁵ It is important to note that passive use is rather more common in the hard sciences. What follows is addressed principally to students in the social sciences and humanities.

When not to

Some writers like the passive because (unlike ‘I’) they think it sounds objective and scientific. In reality, however, it only *sounds* objective: hiding behind passives does not make your research any more scientific. It is probably better to take responsibility for those choices and decisions in your work that were yours. It will not excuse you to say “The results were not checked before submitting the paper.”

One important drawback of the passive is that it obscures who is doing the action. For example, in the statement

It is argued that an institution can increase its legitimacy by obtaining information on membership interests from interest groups.⁶

it is ambiguous who is doing the arguing. Is it generally argued by most authors, is it argued by an author the writer has forgotten to mention, or is it being argued by the writer of the present text? The reader cannot know. Of course, this ambiguity can be made clear while keeping the passive, for example:

1. It is *commonly* argued that an institution can increase its legitimacy by obtaining information on membership interests from interest groups.
2. It has been argued by *Heckendorf and Schiller* that an institution can increase legitimacy by obtaining information on membership interests from interest groups.¹
3. It is argued *here* that an institution can increase legitimacy by obtaining information on membership interests from interest groups.

However, this can be done equally or more effectively in the last two cases by using active forms:

Heckendorf and Schiller argue that an institution can increase legitimacy by obtaining information on membership interests from interest groups.¹

I argue here that an institution can increase legitimacy by obtaining information on membership interests from interest groups.

When to use it

So when *do* we use the passive? Most commonly, the passive is used when the writer wants to move the focus onto a noun that would normally be the object. Let us assume for example that a writer is discussing types of assistance provided in developing sub-national borrowing. She would like to focus first on technical assistance. Particularly in languages that have cases, such as Russian or German, it is perfectly possible to put the focus on the object of the sentence simply by switching the word order, for example:

⁴ Hyland, *ibid*, 109.

⁵ Not least because as well as marking all your passive sentences as wrong, it will also mark all your defining relative clauses as wrong.

⁶ This example and several subsequent ones are adapted slightly from the work of CEU students, with kind permission.

Technical assistance in Central and Eastern Europe provided USAID and the World Bank.

↑Object

↑Subject

A native speaker of English, reading this sentence, is likely to be confused and ask '*who* provided *what*'? Because English has no cases, it relies heavily on inflexible word order to convey meaning. In English, the passive does the job of changing the object into a grammatical subject so that it can come to the front of the sentence:

Technical assistance in Central and Eastern Europe *was provided by* USAID and the World Bank.

Another situation where you can use the passive effectively is where the real agent is not known or not of interest, e.g.

While extensive discussion *has been devoted* to the European political system in terms of what it is, surprisingly little attention *has been given* to what kind of political system the EU should be.

Here the existence or lack of discussion of certain topics is what is important; we are not particularly interested in who has (not) been discussing,⁷ and the passive makes this clear.

Conclusion

In short, in the social sciences and humanities, professors may advise students to avoid the first person, but this is more likely because they are tired of reading "I think..." rather than because it does not happen in their discipline. Cautious use of "I" in ways that are appropriate to the discipline, together with cautious passive use and use of dummy agents should help you to navigate this emotional minefield.

⁷ Though we would expect the writer to cite examples of researchers who have devoted attention to this topic.