

First or Third Person?

GRS Writing Group – WED 3 MAY

In the year 1665 I discovered living creatures in rain water...I did not think I should then perceive any living creatures therein; yet viewing it attentively, I did, with admiration, observe a thousand of them in one drop of water, which were the smallest sort, that I had seen hitherto.

van Leewenhoeck (1676) Concerning Little Animals by Him Observed in Rain-Well-Sea and Snow Water as Also in Water Wherein Pepper Had Lain Infused. Philosophical Transactions 12: 821-831



Have you been told to write in first person or third person?

What is normal in your discipline?

Whether or not to use first person to describe your study or your perspective will come down to your disciplinary norm and your choice of style.

- The sciences tend to avoid using first person in favour of the seemingly anonymous third person which implies neutrality, objectivity and impartiality.
- In the humanities, where agency is valued, first person is often encouraged as it positions the researcher 'inside' the research.
- The social sciences often lie somewhere in between.

The **first person** pronouns include the singular forms 'I', 'me', 'my', and the plural forms 'we', 'us', and 'our'. Irrespective of disciplinary norm, it is always acceptable to use first person when providing your perspective or describing your study.

Style choice - first person sentences are often more direct, shorter and clearer. First person can be used in a way that is not too personal.

Differentiation - first person can be used to differentiate your work from the work of others.

Strength of assertion – first person can also add strength to an opinion statement as third person can give the impression of lack of 'ownership' of ideas.

When first person has been adopted in a thesis, it has traditionally been first person singular.

However, with the inclusion of multi-authored publications within theses, there are now more theses written in first person plural.

The **second person**, 'you', is often considered too conversational to be used in any discipline.

Alternatives include 'the people', 'individuals', 'the community', 'one', or 'the reader'.



Some useful resources:

Grammar Revolution: List of pronouns

<http://www.english-grammar-revolution.com/list-of-pronouns.html>

University of North Carolina's Writing Centre: Should I use 'I'?

<http://writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/should-i-use-i/>

Webb (1992) The use of first person in academic writing: objectivity, language and gatekeeping.
Journal Advanced Nursing. 17:747-752

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/1607509>



If you're interested in how things have changed in the sciences see:

Gross & Harmon (eds). 2007. [The Scientific Literature: A Guided Tour](#). University of Chicago Press.

https://books.google.com.au/books?id=0Ns56qzBMIUC&pg=PA34&redir_esc=y&hl=en#v=onepage&q&f=false

Next session: May 17 Academic wordbanks and word lists

Further details of the UWA GRS Writing Group, including advice sheets to download, here:

www.postgraduate.uwa.edu.au/students/resources/communities#writinggroup