

In academic writing the convention is to write in the third person. This means not using personal pronouns (words such as I, me or my), and avoiding referring to yourself or your reader.

If you are producing a piece of reflective writing, or if your tutor has told you that it is acceptable to write in the first/second person, this is fine. In other circumstances, or if in doubt, always try to write in the third person.

What does this mean?

If you are writing an e-mail to a friend or relation, updating your Facebook profile, tweeting about what you think, or even filling in a job application you tend to write in the **first person**. This means describing yourself as I, or saying things like *“I went to a bar last night”* or *“I will swim in the sea on Saturday”*. You might also talk about *“my book”* or give your opinion about something saying *“it seems to me”*.

This is fine in everyday life and your friends and family would think you were a bit strange if you started saying things like *“a bar was visited last night”* or *“the sea will be swum in on Saturday”*. However, in academic writing that is exactly what you would need to do.

How do I do that?

In academic writing you need to find **impersonal** ways of expressing your ideas and intentions.

For example:

You might say to your friend *“for my dissertation I will be trying to find the relationship between money spent on advertising and increased consumer spending”*.

That is fine, you are telling your friend what you are going to do in clear simple English. However, in your dissertation proposal you would have to put this into third person language. For example:

“This dissertation will explore the relationship between money spent on advertising and increases in consumer spending”.

By removing the personal (first person) language, and by focusing on the subject (in this case, the dissertation) rather than yourself as the author, this is now written in the third person.

“I will be trying to find” has been replaced with *“This dissertation will explore”*. It may sound odd, because it is really *you* who is going to do the research, but your marker will know that.

How do I express my own opinion in third person language?

One of the most confusing things about writing at university is the idea that markers want to know your opinion, but that they want you to avoid saying “*I think*”.

You can overcome this with phrases such as:

- It would appear that ...
- The evidence would suggest that ...
- It could be argued that ...

These are all subtle ways of saying ‘I think’ in the third person. It is also very important to support your opinion with evidence, and so you might say:

- The findings of the study support the conclusion that ...
- Martin’s findings (2012) that ... would support the argument that ...
- Truss’s argument (2011) that ... would lead to the conclusion that ...

The more you use third person language in your academic writing the better you will get at it.

What to avoid

In some academic writing you may find phrases like:

- The researcher will examine ...
- This author is of the opinion that ...
- One argues that ...

Many academics suggest that this is another way of referring to yourself as I, by giving yourself an alias. You usually do not need to do this. There is always a way of rephrase your points to avoid first person writing. However, if you have been asked to write a reflective assignment (as noted earlier in this hand-out) your marker may encourage you to refer directly to yourself. If in doubt, please speak to your course team about this.

It is worth developing this skill as most markers will appreciate you writing in the third person. The more you do it the better you will get at it.