

How do I write in the third person?

What does it mean?

Essentially, if you write in the third person, you do not talk about or acknowledge yourself or your reader in your writing. That means avoiding the words: I, me, my, you, your, we, our.

Why do it?

Being able to put ideas across in the third person, rather than in the first or second person enables an objective and considered view of your topic. This kind of writing is vital for academic assignments as it helps to reduce the possibility of any bias in your work and also demonstrates your research skills.

How do I do it?

The key to academic writing is in the writing of verbs in their PASSIVE form, as opposed to their ACTIVE form.

The **active** voice is very common in spoken English: The student wrote the essay. In this example, the student is the focus or object of the sentence.

The **passive** voice in writing often uses the verb 'to be', with the past tense, were, or was. The object or essay becomes the focus of the sentence in place of the subject: The essay was written by the student. In this example, the writing of the essay is the focus, it does not matter who wrote it.

Examples:

I surveyed a group of tutors whom **I selected** at random.

'**I surveyed**' and '**I selected**' are ACTIVE because, in this case, I did something to something, in this case, a group.

Examples of Passive:

Tutors, who **had been** selected at random **were** surveyed; or, 'A randomised group of tutors **was** surveyed'.

The tutors had something done to them i.e. they did not do anything to anyone. In this example the reader will expect that it was you who undertook the survey; you do not need to explain this.

When reading through your work, identify phrases which use the first or second person such as I or you. If they are in a quotation, you do not need to change it, although paraphrasing is always a good idea. If not, aim to de-personalise the vocabulary. Focus on what has, is being or will be done instead. For academic writing there is usually no need to state explicitly that you have done something, or speak

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directly to your reader. Note that for some scientific reports, group reports or reflective pieces, you may need to emphasise your role, or that of colleagues, by using 'I' or their name, so check your assignment brief.

Example 1

'Miss Atwell, Mr Stark and I argued about the value of the European Union'. Consider the following:

- What is the main issue here? Is it the people or the argument?
- Do readers need to know who disagreed? Why?
- Do the names detract from the main issue?

This could be rewritten using the passive form:

There was disagreement relating to the value of the European Union; or, The value of the European Union was debated.

Note that the term 'argued' has been changed here as it has negative and unconstructive connotations.

Usually the only requirement for including names in an assignment is to acknowledge authors you are using to reinforce your assertions.

In conclusions, you may be required to come to a judgement. The academic form of words should take the objective view, consequently minimising the use of 'I' or 'me' or 'my'.

Example 2

From: 'I don't believe that equality of opportunity means ignoring differences; I don't think that taking a gender-blind or race-blind approach ensures equality of opportunity'.

To: 'It is not that equality of opportunity means ignoring differences: taking a race-blind or gender-blind approach does not necessarily ensure equality of opportunity'.

The second passage asserts the writer's position on the question of equal opportunity. It is a conclusion which, when it follows a sound analysis and a coherent discussion of the issues, has more authority than the first.

Don't forget to check your assignment brief to see if you are asked to talk in the first person, but most will ask for the third person. Come and see us in Learning Development if you are unsure.