

# Writing in the First Person

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## Writing in first person in Anthropology:

*This is a guide to using 'first person' tense in your written assessment tasks in the discipline of Anthropology. It is primarily designed for assessments tasks like research essays and reports.*

*It is also appropriate to write in first person for other tasks like reflective journals, indeed, it would be very difficult not to! Some of the advice in this guide may not apply to these other types of assignments (i.e. in a journal entry it is likely that you will be explicitly commenting on your own thoughts, feelings and emotions).*

## A few additional notes for using this guide:

- While many Anthropology course co-ordinators encourage the use of first person in written assignments – **it is not mandatory**. If you are comfortable using 'third person' then continue to do so!
- Whether you are using first or third person it is critical that you think about the tone of your writing and the kinds of evidence that you are using. This guide has some helpful hints for thinking about your writing style beyond debates about first/third person.
- Keep in mind that not all forms of writing in the first person are appropriate – so first person must be used thoughtfully. This guide will give you some hints and tips for using first person effectively.
- Throughout this guide certain key words are followed by this symbol '\*'. This symbol indicates that the term is defined in a list of key terms at the end of the guide.
- Remember that this guide is written for Anthropology students and might not be relevant in other disciplines.
- **If in doubt about disciplinary conventions and specific expectations in your course then please check with your course co-ordinator.**

## What do first person and third person mean?

- Writing in 'first person' means using personal pronouns in your writing (e.g. I, me, mine, we, us, our). For example: 'In this essay I argue that'.
- Writing in 'third person' means removing personal pronouns from your writing and using alternatives (e.g. he/she, them, their). For example: 'This essay argues that'.
- You might have been instructed to avoid using 'I' in an essay and to write in 'third person', however, preferences regarding writing in first or third person differ depending on the discipline.

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## Debates about the use of first/third person outside and within anthropology

- In many disciplines, using first person is negatively associated with subjectivity, informality and ego-centric writing. Conversely, writing in third person is argued to ‘convey, an impression that the ideas being discussed have a neutral, value-free, impartial basis’ (Webb 1992:748). Yet, as Webb discusses, the use of third person can conceal how knowledge is actively being created (i.e. the role of the author / researcher) and can result in the omission of important information (1992:749). From this perspective, using phrases like ‘this essay’ or avoiding discussing the self can actually mask power relations or poor research practices (See Example 1 in text box on next page).
- Using ‘I’ doesn’t necessarily mean that the author is making the text ‘all about them’ or is an ego-maniac! That said, first-person must be used carefully to ensure that the text is not too insular. When using first person you still need to draw on evidence from scholarly sources beyond your own experience (see ‘Things to avoid when using first person’ below).
- In anthropology, first person is frequently used because anthropologists typically value positioned accounts of social life. That is, anthropologists argue that everyone writes from a particular vantage-point or position and that this position should be acknowledged. [Note: This hasn’t always been the case. See for example the final dot point on this page].
- Furthermore, some anthropologists suggest that writing in first-person helps anthropologist to be **reflexive\*** and to address concerns raised by what has become known as the ‘**crisis of representation\***’. This is because *who did the research, how they did so, and who is writing*, are critical question that anthropologists ask when they read texts. As Stone (n.d.) discusses, the use of first or third person reflects disciplinary conventions regarding what how knowledge is created and what knowledge is. Thus, in some areas (like anthropology) it is important to acknowledge that ‘who you are shapes what you perceive and know’ (ibid).
- Writing in first person is one approach that anthropologists have developed to try and address perceived flaws in earlier ethnographic texts (i.e. a-historical, generalised, lack of detail about the author’s role in the research and the production of the text).

### EXAMPLE 1: Third person in the lab

In the comments section of an article titled ‘Academic writing: why no ‘me’ in PhD?’ a commenter made the following observation about using third person to describe a laboratory process:

‘Consider a sentence like “slides were carbon coated for EMP analysis”. By whom? Be me? By a cack-handed undergraduate summer student? By a technician with 30 years’ experience? These things make a difference. In a lot of cases you remove information when you recast a sentence in the passive’

(‘Underwhat’ in comments section Agaoglu 2013, n.p.)

In this comment the author highlights how writing in third person can result in a more

## Why write in first person for undergraduate assignments?

- As Moberg (2013:322, original emphasis) discusses, in the past ‘ethnographic accounts have described *entire cultures in this third-person manner*, in effect blurring the relationship

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between what the anthropologist writes about a society and how he or she acquired the information'. Writing in first person encourages you to learn disciplinary conventions and to reflect on the *process* of creating a written account of people's beliefs, behaviours and practices (i.e. it helps you to develop your anthropological voice).

- Writing in first person can help you to write in a more direct and assertive manner (i.e. active versus passive voice). It prompts you to revise verbose or imprecise statements and to be specific. This is particularly beneficial when you are writing to a short word count and you need to be as clear and concise as possible. In their advice from a 'how to' guide written for a Science audience, Day & Gastel (2012:72) suggest that writing in first person enables you to more directly say what you mean:

'If you mean "I found that..." or "We conclude that..." say so. Try to avoid wordier, and sometimes more ambiguous constructions, such as "It was found in the present investigation that ..." and "It is concluded that".'

- Writing in first person helps you to demonstrate that you are the author. Remember that part of writing a successful essay/report/etc. is showing that you have mastered the material (i.e. that you have the ability to craft a compelling argument). Writing in first person makes the work that you have done explicit and helps you to illustrate your control of the content.
- First person is a good tool to use in sections of your work where you want to succinctly highlight what you *will do* or what you *have done* (i.e. introduction, linking back to the essay question, transitions between paragraphs, conclusion).
- Consider using some 'I have' and/or 'I will' statements. (Note: Make sure that you vary these so that your work is not repetitive).
  - In this essay/paragraph/section I will ...
  - In this essay/paragraph/section I have ...
  - In the following paragraph/section I will ...
  - I have explored/examined/discussed/summarised/highlighted [re-iterate your key point]
  - I will now consider/introduce/outline [state what the next paragraph of your work will cover]

## Things to avoid when using first person

*Writing in first person is not a cure-all. Think carefully about the below pit-falls.*

### Unsupported opinion

- One of the reasons that some disciplines avoid writing in first person is because they argue that academic writing needs to be rational and objective. From this perspective, first person is associated with emotion, bias and unsupported opinion<sup>1</sup>. In anthropology we contend that

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<sup>1</sup> See for example Monash Universities guide to avoiding the personal pronoun 'I' at <http://www.monash.edu.au/lls/llonline/writing/arts/sociology/2.3.1.xml> accessed 29/09/2017.

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it is possible to write in first person whilst maintaining a professional tone and ensuring that your argument is properly supported with evidence.

- Writing in first person DOES NOT mean that you are solely giving your personal opinion on a topic OR that you need to share personal anecdotes / stories from your life. All arguments / claims made in written work need to be supported with appropriate evidence (in anthropology ethnographic examples are a central form of evidence).
- When writing in first person you should typically avoid phrases like 'I think', 'In my opinion' or 'I feel'. More effective substitutes include phrases like 'I demonstrate' or 'I illustrate'. These are useful because they imply a relationship to evidence beyond your own thoughts, opinions and beliefs (i.e. they better allow you to substantiate your position by showing how it is informed by material from anthropological sources).
- If you do wish to include your own emotions or feelings in a piece of writing you should do so *cautiously, thoughtfully* and *sparingly* so that you are avoiding broad generalisations, taken-for-granted assumptions and **ethnocentric statements**\*. It is a good idea to limit this style of writing (i.e. it can be effective if used in one section but should not form the bulk of your written assignment). Exceptions to this include assessment tasks like reflective journals.

## Emotive language / value judgements

- Writing in first person can sometimes make it easier to make emotionally charged statements or value judgements that are not **reflexive**\*.
- Remember that a critical aspect of anthropology is thinking carefully about how values are *formed* in specific cultural contexts. Anthropologists analyse how specific people in a particular time and place understand their world, noting that these understanding are fluid and vary cross-culturally. Therefore, what people consider to be 'disgusting', 'shocking', 'beautiful' etc. differs depending on the cultural context.
- Try to avoid using first person to comment on or critique other people's beliefs, behaviours and practices in ways that suggest your own position is 'right' or 'normal'. For example, it would be inappropriate to include a sentence like: 'I am horrified that some authors would suggest that graffiti is a legitimate 'art form'. It is clearly ugly scribble that is expensive to clean and unsightly'.
- It is possible to use your own emotional reactions or value judgements as a *lens for reflection*. In particular, if you do so in order to question your own classifications and to analyse your own cultural background / learnt beliefs and values. However, this can be difficult to do and should be avoided if you are not confident. Talk to your course co-ordinator or tutor if you need some advice.

## Informal language

- Whether you are writing in first or third person, informal language (i.e. slang, casual or conversational tone) should be avoided.

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- For example: 'I really don't think it's a fair thing to judge people badly because of the music they like. I have spent heaps of time hanging out with kids that think rap music is dope and I reckon they are all pretty different'
- This is a poor example of the use of first person for a number of reasons:
  - Informal language that needs to be revised (i.e. 'kids', 'reckon', 'dope')
  - Reference to personal opinion without reflexivity or development of the idea with links to academic sources (i.e. 'I don't think it's a fair thing...'). This type of argument is too narrow and doesn't allow the author to address the broader concerns likely to be raised by the essay question (i.e. becomes an opinion piece).
  - Author generalises from own experience without considering if this experience is representative or if it can be supported by appropriate evidence.

## Key Terms

### **Crisis of representation**

The term the 'crisis of representation' has become a short-hand in anthropology for discussing debates about the production of anthropological knowledge and in particular, ethnographic texts, that began in the 1960s but intensified in the 1980s (Marcus 2015). These debates focused on the ethics of 'representation', including the writing techniques that are used by anthropologists. This 'crisis' led to a number of developments including: '...alternative modes of representing others, questioning the act of representation itself, suggesting the ways ethnographic knowledge emerges from collaboration and dialogue, and probing the political conditions that have inhibited such possibilities...' (Marcus 2015:89). Since this time, anthropologists have more carefully considered the kinds of texts that they produce and their own role in their production (see also **reflexive** below).

### **Ethnocentric statements**

Ethnocentrism means 'evaluating other people from one's own vantage point and describing them in one's own terms' (Hylland-Eriksen 2015:8). An ethnocentric statement is a statement where the author is not able to look beyond their own 'vantage point' and 'terms' to consider how someone else might view the world. According to Hylland-Eriksen (ibid) this is a serious barrier to understanding. In your written work you are encouraged to avoid ethnocentric statements by thinking about other ways of knowing, being and doing. As Metcalf (2006:6) states, 'ethnocentrism must be set aside if there is to be any chance of entering, even partially, into the worlds of other people'.

### **Reflexive**

Being 'reflexive' or utilising 'reflexivity' are terms used by anthropologists and other social scientists to describe a process of reflection or self-reference (Davies 2008:4). It is now common for anthropologists to reflect on all aspects of their research including: how they conducted their fieldwork (i.e. access, positionality, relationships formed, impacts of gender,

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ethnicity, age and other factors), the choices made in the process of writing up, and the potential impacts of their work on the people they are attempting to understand.

See the below quotes from Moberg (2013) and Mascia-Lees & Black (although Mascia-Lees and Black use the term 'self-reflexive'):

Writing in a self-reflective manner means that the author is foregrounding the experience and perspectives of the fieldworker, so that the reader at least knows which biases he or she is subjected to when reading the ethnographic account, as well as the personal and political circumstances that led to its creation' (Moberg 2013:322).

'Scholars who are self-reflexive analyse their status and the role they play in their own research and writing and the impact all of it has on the lives of the group they are studying' (Mascia-Lees & Black 2017:97).

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This guide to Writing in the First Person for Anthropology was written by Dr Dianne Rodger.