

# ***How to Bend the Rules in Writing***

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WR 121, Winter 2021

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Rules play a big role early on in life. In elementary school we are taught about rules and how to approach situations in a proper manner. We learn rules in math, science, writing, how to treat others and while playing games. Likewise, writing constructs are a set of rules that draws out a template of how writing is supposed to be formatted. Although, if we all use the same style approach to writing, how do we distinguish between different writers' voices? One construct that is consistently taught is to never use "I" in essays. In writing it is vital to be able to provide the reader with your own thoughts, and in reality, this construct is not as black and white as it may seem. I remember in second grade when learning about social emotional skills, the teacher explained how important it was to be yourself, and to not try to be someone else. It is okay for people to be different and they are still just as valid, just like in writing it should be okay for someone to hold a different opinion and have a different writing process than someone else. I'm sure most people have heard the phrase, "If everyone was like each other it would be a very boring world." Well I think this holds true in writing too. If everyone has the same strategy and route to the end of the board game, then how is

that interesting? In general, writing constructs are a barrier to writing and limits others' ability to express themselves because they are tied to the idea of following a narrow path, or a "one size fits all" outlook.

A misconception among many young writers is that the use of "I" within essay writing should never be used. Teachers stress that students learn how to write formally, so that they can be prepared to write in a professional setting. This way of teaching is directed toward standardized testing and making sure students understand how to use formal language. Even though this construct is normally stressed, there are little to no sources that suggest that it is a good idea or that it is a beneficial rule to implement. Parker says, "It seems paramount and antithetical as they share in their words: Writers can never write using the first person" (134). She describes how her students come into her classroom thinking that writing in the first person is wrong. She mentions how most of her students first learn this construct in middle school, and how she tries to help them regain the idea of using first person when appropriate. She emphasizes the importance of incorporating yourself in your writing in hopes of breaking this thought cycle. If we can remove the teaching of this construct or "myth" as Irvin describes it, then writers will benefit from not having this idea ingrained in them, making them hesitant to ever use the first person. We should teach students when it is appropriate and vice versa, as an alternative to just throwing the first person out of essay writing completely.

I find it somewhat counterintuitive to teach students to adhere to all these rules in writing, and then, once we get to college, break those rules. Instead it would be more beneficial if we taught students how to navigate various styles of writing. We should not

wait until the first year of college to teach what academic writing entails and schools should teach us how to use different writing styles and when they are appropriate to use, so we don't have so many misconceptions or misleading information on what writing is supposed to be or look like.

While writing formally is a good skill to obtain, teaching students not to use "I" actually creates a barrier later in their school writing career. It can put up a gate, keeping writers from using their authentic voice and potentially pushing away what the writer is actually trying to convey. Not only that, this rule does not apply to all areas of writing. There are various ways that different fields ask you to write in, so only learning one way to write formally is not beneficial.

Yes, there are times where writers should not be using "I" or informal words, but when appropriate, writers should definitely utilize it because it will make their writing sound less robotic and in such a big rush to reach the conclusion. The writing center at Loyola University in Chicago suggests leaving yourself and your opinions out of writing. They say, it is simple, just "erase yourself." In the examples given, they show ways of taking statements like "I believe" or "In my opinion" out of formal writing for a history class. In this particular case, it is okay to discourage students from using "I" since it takes away from the objective of the assignment and may lead to the student going on a wild tangent instead of staying on task. The usage of "I" is a way of connecting with the reader and making your writing more relatable, which ultimately makes your argument more effective and interesting. Writing should sound fluid and create a conversation. When told to write in a specific way by using writing constructs, it takes away from the

ability to have free flowing, organic conversations. Writing constructs are like if people were to walk around and have scripted conversations with each other. It would look silly, and it is not nearly as meaningful as having a genuine conversation with someone. The handout provided by the writing center at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill discusses how the use of “I” in academic writing is effective. They say that using “I” provides, “Assertiveness, Clarity and Positioning yourself in the essay.” Steering away from the usage of “I” can make your writing get cloudy and might cause the reader to get bored. “The false conception that a writer must be removed or, even worse, nearly dead to one’s audience is anathema” (Rodriguez 132). Reading dry text with no established voice or personality is never entertaining to read, so adding “I” and personality into your writing can help give your writing some spice and make it more interesting.

Some writers’ first experiences practicing writing include using “I” statements, and a lot of assignments in elementary school are about yourself to become more familiar with who you are and your peers. I remember in kindergarten we were asked to write about each of our family members. Now, this was, of course, in one or two sentences, considering it was kindergarten, but it made a lot of sense to introduce writing in this way, so we could understand ourselves and our backgrounds better, making our writing more self aware and bringing out our personalities. Parker uses a quote from Stephen King to further explain why it is okay, and students should be encouraged to find their own writing style, to let themselves have the freedom of expression in their writing, and establish a unique voice that people will remember. King says, “It’s all on the table, and

you should use anything that improves the quality of your writing and doesn't get in the way of your story" (135). Parker uses this quote and connects it to her way of motivating her students to add more personalization and a more powerful presence. As a reader, it is a lot more fun to read something that is not just facts and saying something just to say it. It's better to be able to have some kind of connection to what the author is talking about and feel like an insider.

As we've learned previously, one of the most important elements of an academic essay is making conversation and having connections throughout to make it more engaging. "Leave Yourself Out Of Writing" by Joseph Rodriguez, introduces the significance of using your personal experiences to form conversation and make yourself a "recognizable voice" (132). American schoolchildren, and writers alike, would argue that incorporating personal experiences gives more sustenance and room for conversation among readers. As the reader, we want to know more about the writer and their experience with the topic on the table. This adds something for the reader to grasp onto and may give the reader something they have in common with the author, which is a great way to create connectedness between the reader and the author because you gain more of a concrete understanding for what the author's message is and how their experiences affect their views.

Writing needs to have a purpose and a connecting storyline. A good piece of writing should make the reader feel something, or make questions arise for them to later go back and further contemplate. Personal experiences and the use of "I" are some of the key ingredients to engaging the reader and making good use of connections to your

argument. It provides more of an emotional aspect and gives the reader a better sense of who you are and your intentions to get your point across. Wardle and Downs state that depending on the experience that you talk about in your writing, your audience will be able to relate, and it leaves more of an impact on the reader (8). In order to have a compelling piece of writing, it is important to include personal experiences. Using the first person can help give your writing a boost.

In high school my best essays were my personal essays. They gave the reader something that was more memorable and impactful, opposed to my heavily structured essays, which were more about covering the main points and ending it with a predictable conclusion that didn't give the reader a window for conversation. By incorporating personal stories, the reader was able to clearly visualize the story and the point I was making. Using "I" statements made the writing sound less stiff and more true to my voice and personality. My college application essay was very personal recounting my experience freshman year dealing with a sudden loss of a parent due to cancer, and stepping up to the plate to take care of my family. Without the use of "I" throughout this essay, it would sound very awkwardly worded and not as personal nor would it have left an impact on the reader.

Overall, writing in the first person is something you should not be afraid of including in your writing and will make it seem better organized and more relatable to your reader. Many students still have the misconception that it is something that they should avoid at all costs, but that is simply not the case. Utilizing the first person throughout an essay will give you a great foundation for making conversation and

creating a more interesting piece for the reader. In addition, the use of personal experiences and anecdotes will amplify and intrigue the reader instead of just spitting facts and writing bland text. Next time you sit down to write an essay where it is appropriate to use the first person, consider leaving this construct behind.

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## **Author Bio**

Andrew Ashley is an Elementary Education major at Western Oregon University. He thoroughly enjoys working with children and plans to pursue teaching at the elementary level. He hopes to one day become a first or second grade teacher. Aside from school and work, Andrew enjoys hiking, exploring nature, playing with dogs and finding new recipes to cook.