

Third-Person Point of View (POV) in Academic Writing

What is third-person POV?

In academic writing, the use of the third-person pronouns (*he/she/it* and *they/them*) neither refer to the writer or the person being addressed. For example, in academic writing one may say “the study from the University of Pennsylvania states that 1 in 5 people have blue eyes.” On the other hand, first-person pronouns (*I/me/my* and *we/us*) and second-person pronouns (*you/yours*) are directly referring to the writer and the person being addressed. With the same example as before, the phrasing would change to “in the study I read from the University of Pennsylvania, it says that 1 in 5 people have blue eyes.”

The difference between these two POVs is that third-person pronouns create distance between the writer and the writing; conversely, first-person pronouns indicate a more intimate relationship between the writer and the writing.

Why do I have to write in third-person POV?

When using third-person pronouns, the writer can create distance between themselves and the writing or research at hand, which allows the writer to maintain an objective tone and stance. This is especially important when writers are engaging in research. When the writer is presenting new studies or information, using third-person pronouns permits the writer to adequately present quotes, statistics, and other information without getting mixed up in the linguistic nuances of what the writer is explaining, what the reader knows, or what the research is saying.

Additionally, writing in third-person can help remove wordiness and unnecessary information. By removing extra pronouns, the writing can be more direct and phrased into clear, powerful statements. For example, it’s unnecessary to preface an assertion with “I believe” or “I think”—the reader knows that the writing contains your thoughts, so the “I” pronoun is not needed.

Disclaimer: Using first-person in academic writing is *not* necessarily wrong, but it can weaken argumentative statements. For example, if you’re arguing that dogs are better than cats, and you say “a recent article from the *New York Times* states that dogs are more likely to have a positive impact on mental health,” it sounds much more convincing than “I read an article from the *New York Times*, and it said that dogs have a positive impact on mental health.” The reason the former statement is more convincing is because it states objective and credible information without including bias or personal opinions. First-person POV should be used sparingly and when required or necessary, like in a reflection paper or personal statement.

Examples of Third-Person and First-Person POVS in Academic Writing

Research Paper

Third-person POV: According to Jones' article from *Psychology Journal*, the fear of falling is the only “natural-born fear” in humans, and all other fears develop through experience (Jones). Similarly, Gomez’s study from Flores Lunas University states that “the fear of falling is a natural fear that all humans are born with,” and he mentions that some indigenous Brazilian peoples believe this fear stems from beliefs about humans falling from a star above Earth (Gomez).

First-person POV: I read in Jones' article from *Psychology Journal* that the fear of falling is the only “natural-born fear” in humans, and all other fears develop through experience (Jones). Similarly, Gomez’s study from Flores Lunas University states that “the fear of falling is a natural fear that all humans are born with,” and I also read in his study that some indigenous Brazilian peoples believe this fear stems from beliefs about humans falling from a star above Earth (Gomez).

In the above examples, the third-person example is stronger because the content requires an objective tone and stance from the writer. The first-person example also sounds more conversational because the sentences are focused on the writer’s actions of writing and researching their findings. The purpose of research isn’t to focus on the writer’s writing process or their acts of research, but instead on the information being presented.

Reflection Paper

Third-person POV: This group presentation taught the writer to communicate and present their research in different modes. This was an interesting experience since the writer had never considered presenting their research in the form of a cinematic video. In the past, they had to present their research at conferences, which required them to read directly from their research paper. However, in this instance they were able to present their research chronologically and, therefore, allow it to build and branch into other parts of their research naturally. This process of “building their own research” as opposed to categorizing it like a traditional research paper provided a new perspective of their research.

First-person POV: This group presentation taught me to communicate and present my research in different modes. This was an interesting experience since I had never considered that I could present my research in the form of a cinematic video. In the past, when I had to present my research at conferences, it required me to read directly from my research paper. However, in this presentation I was able to present my research chronologically and, therefore, allow it to build and branch into other parts of my research naturally. This process of “building my research” as opposed to categorizing it like a traditional research paper provided a new perspective of my research.

Here, the third-person example is clunky and confusing. While some reflection exercises can be done this way, they are rare. In the reflective process, the writer is directly involved in the process and the resulting information. Reflective writing is an example of how academic writing can require the first-person POV to maintain clarity.

Argumentative Paper

Third-person POV: The stereotypical construction of femininity in *Mean Girls*, especially in the depiction of Regina George, displays a negative role model for young women in the modern day. With repetitive immodest outfits and passive aggressive language, Regina's character encourages young women to dress inappropriately and adopt immature language patterns. This correlation between celebrity depictions of gender roles and their impact on young women is explained in Sophia Martin's study on gender performance.

First-person POV: The stereotypical construction of femininity in *Mean Girls*, especially in the depiction of Regina George, displays a negative role model for young women in the modern day. You can see repetitive immodest outfits and hear the passive aggressive language, which shows how Regina's character encourages young women to dress inappropriately and adopt immature language patterns. I noticed this correlation between celebrity depictions of gender roles and their impact on young women in Sophia Martin's study on gender performance.

The second example uses both first-person and second-person pronouns, which results in an informal tone. Also, by using first-person and second-person pronouns instead of third-person, the argument sounds like more of an unsupported opinion instead of a well-researched argument.

Activity 1: Switching from First-Person POV to Third-Person POV

The following excerpt is an example of a research paper written in the first-person POV. Change this excerpt from first-person POV to third-person POV. You may need to change some of the sentence structures to maintain clarity.

I read about the recent blizzard that swept through the eastern seaboard and parts of the northern midwest. This blizzard brought tremendous snowfall. We know that snowfall and seasonal blizzard conditions are normal for these areas, but this storm exposes issues with federally funded snow patrol crews and emergency care access. I believe that these issues demonstrate the poorly managed federal funds in the states of New York, Pennsylvania, and Michigan.

Activity 2: Switching from Third-Person POV to First-Person POV

The following excerpt is an example of a cover letter written in the third-person POV. Change this letter from third-person POV to first-person POV. You may need to change some of the sentence structures to maintain clarity.

Sarah's experience in human resource management is exemplary and shows her expertise in diverse communications and organization. Sarah also has a balanced demeanor of empathy and professionalism, which has served her well in her job as an administrative assistant for Well Life Therapy Practices. In this job, Sarah was tasked with communicating via phone and email with mentally unstable and sensitive clients. Sarah explains that many of these clients needed careful guidance for scheduling appropriate types of appointments, and explanations of clinical terms, medical forms, and types of practices that Well Life participates in.