

1.21 Avoiding personal language

For most academic writing you are expected to avoid using personal language, however, this depends on the type of writing you are doing. If you are writing about yourself and your experience (for example, in a diary, journal, or reflective essay) then you must use personal language.

Check your guidelines and ask your tutor/lecturer if you are not sure.

Two other general points:

It's best not to refer to the reader as "you". Don't write, for example, As you can see in Figure 1. Use one of the ways shown below to avoid this.

It's also best not to refer to yourself as "the author".

How to avoid personal language

There are three main ways of doing this:

- Use a passive rather than an active verb
- Use an impersonal phrase such as it is believed
- Use, for example, the essay OR this section as the subject of the sentence (instead of I will consider you can use This essay will consider)

Passive verbs

These are often used in introductions to essays or to chapters or sections in a longer piece of work when you are stating what the writing will deal with and how it is structured.

Instead of:

In my essay, I will discuss the role of the ombudsman. (=active verb)

You could write:

In this essay the role of the ombudsman will be discussed. (=passive verb)

Instead of:

I have divided the chapter into three sections.

Better:

The chapter is divided into three sections.

Impersonal phrases

The subject of these phrases is “it”; for example:

It can be imagined that ...

It may be argued that ...

It is widely held that ...

It should be clear from how you phrase the surrounding language whether or not you are actually expressing a personal opinion here.

Change the subject

As an alternative to using passive verbs in introductions etc, you can change the subject. For example:

Instead of:

In this essay, I will consider the question of immigration control.

You could write:

This essay considers the question of immigration control.

Instead of:

In Chapter 2 I will outline the main causes of the problem.

Alternatively:

Chapter 2 outlines the main causes of the problem.