

Writing & Study Skills Services – Laurier Brantford
English Language Learners (ELL) Support Handout
Writing Academically:
Hints for using English in Essays

This handout refers specifically to writing essays such as critical reviews or research papers. When writing reflections or creative pieces, using formal language is not always as important.

Generally, when writing an academic essay, there is a preference for language that is clear, informative, and concise. Writers present information to a reader, though not to any person specifically. Therefore, it is good practice to consider your language choices.

Using the First Person

Sometimes it is perfectly fine to use the pronoun “I” in an academic paper, and often you will use “I” in reflective writing. However, it is usually best to use “I” for strategic impact and avoid using it too much in academic writing.

- One way to determine whether to keep “I” in a sentence is to figure out if the reader needs to know **who** was involved.
- **For instance:** I read that hippopotamuses have natural sunscreen in their skin.
 - In this case, it is probably not important to the reader that you were doing the reading. They are probably more interested in the actual fact about hippopotamuses.
 - So, you can easily change this *first person* sentence by writing in the *passive voice*: It has been discovered that hippopotamuses have natural sunscreen in their skin.

Using “You” or “We”

“You” and “We” are not used very often in formal writing. This is because you will not always know who will be reading your paper, and you cannot assume that everyone reading your paper will agree with your point of view.

- **For instance:** We have grown up in Ontario and we know all about Canadian customs.
 - This assumes that everyone reading the essay is an Ontarian. However, there may be someone from Manitoba, someone from the US, and someone who grew up in a family that did not partake in dominant Canadian customs reading your essay. Therefore, it is important that you do not assume what your readers will know.
 - Try rewriting to remove those assumptions: Many people who have grown up in Ontario know about Canadian customs.
 - Or you could leave the sentence out altogether if it is not terribly important to your argument

Practice:

- **Rewrite the following sentences without using the first person:**

I found it very interesting that giraffes have sponge-like vessels to equalize the blood flow in the brain. It seems to me that humans do not have this, because I know I am not as tall as a giraffe.

- **Rewrite these sentences with awareness of who may be reading your paper:**

You may find it easiest to meet people in your own community while volunteering.

Over the years, we have become accustomed to seeing advertising that portrays us as deserving of various products.

Tips for Writing Essays More Successfully in English:

1. Vary your vocabulary:

- Use a thesaurus and dictionary to increase the variety of words you use. This will make your essay less repetitive, and will also enrich your grasp of the English language. If you are unsure of how to use a word, try typing it into Google or a search engine to see how others use it in sentences.

2. Try to maintain an objective tone:

- Try to keep sarcasm, moralism and emotion out of a formal paper because essays are more persuasive if a sound argument is presented. Academic readers value neutral language.
- *Example:*
 - **Emotional:** Hitler was an evil monster who killed millions of people!
 - **Neutral:** Adolf Hitler's Nazi regime was responsible for the deaths of millions of people.

3. Avoid making unsupported claims or generalizations:

- Academic readers tend to be suspicious of statements that are too absolute. Words like "all" or "never" make statements less likely to be completely true.
- *Example:*
 - **Too extreme:** All people enjoy writing.
 - **Restrained and Accurate:** Many people enjoy writing, even though some do not.