

Writing in Third Person: What not using the first person REALLY means

Your instructors tell you not to use first person in scholarly writing. So you can't write a sentence like this:

I think the theory can be applied in this situation.

You may be tempted, then, to write the same idea like this:

This learner thinks that the theory can be applied in this situation.

"This learner," though, doesn't really take *you* out of the sentence. Although technically it is third person, it's first person in *spirit* because *you* are still in the sentence. The result is also somewhat awkward and less than graceful. So, this temptation doesn't actually accomplish what your instructors are trying to get you to do.

You could try this, then:

The theory can be applied in this situation.

If you do this, however, you are making an *unsubstantiated claim*. An unsubstantiated claim is one that is not backed up with evidence. It's essentially an opinion.

What your instructors are REALLY trying to get you to do when they ask you *not* to use first person is to avoid making unsubstantiated claims -- claims based on nothing but your opinion, no matter how expert that opinion may be after years of practical experience. Scholarly work requires scholarly evidence and/or analysis for all claims.

You might, then, try a revision of the sentence that includes some analysis of why the claim is true, perhaps starting this way:

The theory can be applied in this situation, because...

The best revision of the original sentence, though, would be one that adds evidence to support your analysis, something like this:

The theory can be applied in this situation because 1) this situation is similar to the one originally used in developing the theory (Smith, 2005); 2) the theory explains all three facets of the situation (Jones, 2004); and 3) when applied, the theory will help locate workable solutions (Jones, 2004; Smith, 2005; see also Perkins, 2002.)

This last version has both analysis and scholarly evidence from the literature. It is no longer in the first person, but more importantly, it is no longer an unsubstantiated claim.

It's not enough to simply remove the first person to make your writing more scholarly. When you subtract the first person, you must add analysis and evidence.