

Never say 'I'? The writer's voice in essays in the humanities

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One of the ways in which the discourse of the disciplines varies is a function of the writer's relationship to his or her material. In some disciplines, such as History, the researcher has no relationship to the primary sources, and the notion that he or she is treating them objectively is reflected (or created) by the use of impersonal language forms; this is the source of the idea, familiar to students, that you "never say I" in academic writing. In other disciplines, however -- such as Literature, Cinema Studies and to some extent Art History -- the researcher's response to the subject matter can be a part of what he or she is writing about, and here the tone, while still relatively formal, can be more personal, though the deployment of evidence must conform to academic ideas of what constitutes a demonstration. Within this category, there are interesting variations again. In Philosophy, for example, the writer's intellect is invited to the essay, but not his/her emotions, while in Art History a sensual response may be the subject of comment. On the other hand, Art History is History as well as Art, and the History part of it calls for impersonal discourse. My paper looks at some of these variations, and the linguistic forms that correlate with them; and I suggest ways of talking about this with students.

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