

## Writing an Effective Essay

Effective writing is direct and keeps the reader focused on what the writing is about. Here is some advice for writing an effective argumentative essay:

### Using “I”

Many of us were taught not to use the first person singular (*I, me*) in formal writing. This prohibition is a noble lie. It forces writers to write more directly and to think more objectively, resisting the temptation to turn everything into an opinion piece.

Replace the old prohibition with a new principle: Place yourself in the background of your writing. You can use the first person singular in your writing, but you have to distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate uses of the first person singular.

When writing an argumentative essay, *everything* is something that “I argue,” but the essay is not *about* what I think; it is about the ideas, claims, and evidence. Do they make a persuasive argument? Accordingly, place yourself in the background, but you do not have to disappear. It is appropriate to refer to “*my* argument.” At times, using the first person singular may be the most direct writing. Compare in this example:

As I have shown, Achilles rejects the trust that is essential to Greek heroic culture.

As we have seen, Achilles...

As has been shown, Achilles...

This is indeed what *you* have shown. “We” works better in speaking than in writing, and technically the reader *saw* and you *showed*. The objective-sounding “As has been shown” also sounds artificial and remote, as if the essay had no author. All of the options are correct, and which one you use is a style decision.

While the essay is *your* argument, the essay is not an opinion piece. Accordingly, you should not use what “I think” as evidence or as a substitute for a substantive argument. It is not appropriate to make claims like the following:

I do not think I would be more moral in Rousseau’s primitive state of nature.

As you read a text, you form personal opinions about it. You’re convinced Rousseau is on to something, or you’re not. The essay though is not about these personal reactions; it is an argument about ideas and how they work in certain texts.

Odysseus is not virtuous because I think violence is wrong.

The “I think” claim moves the essay out of the context of the *Odyssey* and into that of personal opinion. Your opinion about violence is not the proper measure in a Humanities essay. Does Homer think that virtue and violence are opposed? Focus on the text to make your claims; place yourself in the background.

## Use Present Tense

In English, use the past tense when discussing historical events, and the *literary present* when discussing fictional events. Treat literary works, paintings, films, and other artistic creations as if they exist in an eternal present. Accordingly, when you write about authors or artists as they express themselves in their work, stay in the present tense. Here are a few examples:

### *Historical past*

- Paul wrote his letters in the first century.
- Auguste Rodin first sculpted *The Thinker* as part of a larger work.

### *Literary present*

- Paul gives the story of his conversion at the beginning of Galatians.
- Auguste Rodin's *The Thinker* represents thinking as a heroic act.
- In Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, Oedipus investigates the cause of the plague in Thebes.
- Milton's Garden of Eden is truly a "sylvan scene."

### *Combination*

- In the second edition of *Frankenstein*, which Mary Shelley published in 1831, Victor Frankenstein acts as if he is the victim of fate.

## Use Active Voice

In direct writing, subjects *act*. Develop a habit of writing in the **active voice**, and reserve the **passive voice** only for sentences where you specifically want to emphasize that the subject is being *acted upon*. We tend to overuse the passive voice, and it takes conscientious editing to transform passive constructions into active ones.

Passive voice is often constructed by a form of *to be + verb*. The previous sentence is in the passive voice: "is constructed." Active voice makes the subject the actor of the sentence, so to revise sentences in the passive voice, make the sentence's direct or indirect object the new subject, and turn the old subject into the new object. Here are several examples:

*Passive.* Allen Ginsberg is considered a great poet by my friend.

*Active.* My friend considers Allen Ginsberg a great poet.

While Allen Ginsberg might feel like the focus of the sentence, the actor you want to emphasize is "my friend." Notice how converting the sentence into the active voice makes it briefer and more direct.

*Passive.* The case was solved by Sherlock Holmes.

*Active.* Sherlock Holmes solved the case.

The emphasis should be on Sherlock Holmes and his detective skills, not on the case.

*Passive.* Mistakes were made in the investigation.

*Active.* I made mistakes in the investigation.

Passive constructions can obscure the responsible agent. While this might be desirable in a PR statement, it makes for weak writing.

On occasion, the passive voice is preferable when you want to emphasize that a subject is acted upon or when you do not know who the subject is. Here are two examples:

*Passive.* Martin Luther was struck by lightning when he was 22.

*Active.* Lightning struck Martin Luther when he was 22.

Both constructions have their use. There is an admirable drama to the active version. However, it makes sense to emphasize that this was an action that happened to Luther by using the passive voice.

## **Be Direct**

Using active voice makes your writing more direct. Its two strengths are that it is concise and draws attention to what you want to emphasize in your sentences. Direct writing prefers the definite, concrete, and specific over the indefinite, abstract, and general. Your sentences and word choice should reflect these priorities. Here are two additional strategies to make your writing more direct:

1. **Be positive.** Readers remember what things are better than what they are *not*.

*Negative.* Beowulf is *not cautious* in his approach of the dragon.

*Positive.* Beowulf is *reckless* in his approach of the dragon.

Notice the directness of the claim in the positive form. The negative form leaves a lot of room for the reader to interpret what exactly “not cautious” means. Similarly, it is more effective to use “dishonest” instead of “not honest,” and “forgot” instead of “did not remember.”

2. **Avoid distancing words and phrases** that turn sentences into description or indefinite possibility. Examples of such phrases are “there is,” “I think that,” and “could be heard.” Revise the sentence by removing the distance between the reader and the action (emphasis) of the sentence.

*Ex1.* There is a scene in which Frankenstein contemplates creating a second creature.

*Revision.* Frankenstein contemplates creating a second creature.

*Ex2. I think that* Eliot's poem is a lament over a culture shattered by World War I.  
*Revision.* Eliot's poem is a lament over a culture shattered by World War I.

*Ex3. The cheering could be heard* from miles away.

*Revision.* People heard the cheering from miles away.

*Revision.* The audience cheered loudly enough for people miles away to hear it.

In each example, the sentence becomes more direct and emphasis is placed on an active subject. In Ex3, the sentence is indefinite, and it is not clear where the emphasis should be placed. It could be on those who hear the cheering or those who are cheering.

Like "could be heard," there are some words that make claims indefinite and noncommittal. Two common examples are "to appear" and "to seem." In most cases, these words are extraneous and weaken your argument.

*Ex1. Nietzsche seems to reject* Christian values.

*Revision.* Nietzsche rejects Christian values.

"Seems" only raises the question: So, is Nietzsche against them? There are two problems with the sentence. First, it creates a distance between the author and the claim being made. Does the author think this is what Nietzsche argues? Second, "seems" turns the sentence's true verb into an infinitive ("to reject"), thereby de-emphasizing it.

*Ex2. Telemachus appears to be* ready to claim his household from the suitors.

*Revision.* Telemachus is ready to claim his household from the suitors.

"Appears" is only appropriate if you want to discuss the fact that Telemachus appears one way, but is actually another way. For example:

*Ex3. Machiavelli appears to be* advocating tyranny, but that is a misreading of  
*The Prince.*