

The Use of "I"

People are often taught that they should not use the first person singular in formal writing. This is a superstition. Why not write, "As I have shown, Rousseau's opinion is foolish"? Is it any more correct to write, "As we have seen . . ." (which can sound falsely intimate or smugly ingratiating) or, "As has been shown . . ." (which can sound clumsy and remote)? Treat "I" as you would any other word: use it when it is effective; don't use it constantly or make it a substitute for argument:

Rousseau's opinion makes little sense to me. I certainly wouldn't like to live in a primitive society, and I can't imagine that I would be any better off morally for doing so. I think that Voltaire's ideas are much more logical, although I

Avoiding Sentence Fragments

A sentence must include both a subject and a predicate. The subject is based on a noun or pronoun; the predicate is based on a verb that describes what the noun or pronoun does or has done to it:

Helen [subject] opened [predicate] the book.

A sentence may evolve a great many complexities, but the basic structure will still be visible:

Helen [subject], a victim of morbid curiosity, tore open [predicate] the book and recoiled in horror from what she saw.

A sentence fragment lacks a subject, a predicate, or both:

Went on to become a political leader. (no subject)

Plato, the eminent Greek philosopher. (no predicate)

While traveling to Sparta.

The last example is not promising as either subject or predicate; "traveling" is a verb form, but it can't function as a verb because it cannot, by itself, express the action performed by a subject: one would say, "He travels to Sparta," but not, "He traveling to Sparta."

A sentence fragment cannot stand alone and still express a complete and fully comprehensible thought. This is obvious in each of the three examples given above, but it is also true in the following case:

Because he had not been trained for the job.

If this statement were limited to "He had not been trained for the job," it would be a complete and correct sentence; it has a subject ("He") and a verb ("had been trained"). The "because," however, points to some other statement on which all of this depends; "because he had not been trained for the job" is in fact a dependent clause that can make sense only when something else is added:

He [subject] failed [predicate] because he had not been trained for the job.

There are only a few situations in which sentence fragments may properly be used. They are sometimes effective in providing special emphasis--

There was no one there. No one at all.

--or in giving brief answers to rhetorical questions:

Is this an intelligent decision? Hardly.

Special Use of Present Tense

The basic rule is: You should use the past tense when discussing historical events, while you should use the literary present when discussing fictional events.

Literary works, paintings, films, and other artistic creations are assumed to exist in an eternal present. When you are writing about writers or artists as they express themselves in their work, stay in present tense. Here are some examples:

- Aeschylus' drama is concerned with what happens to Orestes after he has killed his mother.
- In Michelangelo's painting, Christ judges the world.
- Johnson's characters journey to Cairo.
- Plato argues without much conviction.
- Paul writes about the hardships he has endured.

But when you are writing about a certain historical event (even the creation of a literary or artistic work), use the past tense. Some examples:

- Paul wrote in the first century.
- Picasso then produced a series of sculptures.

Sometimes a sentence must employ both present and past tense. For example:

- The first part of the poem, which she completed in 1804, describes the effects of isolation from society.

Examine your changes of tense very carefully, however, and see if there is a logical reason for them.