

First person, second person, third person: Which voice do I want to use?

As we already noticed, writing creates relationships among readers and writers. Maintaining the appropriate relationship with an audience through writing practices also contributes to creating a persuasive ethos. The kind of relationship writers create with an audience is often also determined by the genre being used. A critical part of creating and maintaining an appropriate relationship with the audience lies in the use of personal pronouns.

- Third person voice is often called objective voice because the writer assumes a position of neutrality on the topic they are writing about. For example, when a writer uses third-person voice, writing he and she, never referring to themselves, the writer creates a rather it uses the personal pronouns he, she, they, and it. A lot of academic argument is written in third person voice. It creates a formal relationship with the audience, holding them at a certain distance. Third person voice is appropriate for many genres and situations. A lot of news reports, academic arguments, and scientific reports are written in third person voice.
- Second person voice creates a relationship where the writer talks and the reader listens. It very often uses only the pronoun “you” because the writer is talking directly to the reader. When it doesn’t even use the pronoun you, but just assumes it, it is called the imperative voice. Recipes and instructions are most frequently written in this voice: “Preheat oven to 425.” “Tuck tab A into slot B.” I’ve used second person voice in this text when I’ve been giving you tips. Using second voice outside of instructions and recipes can present problems, though. Look at this sentence, for example: “I know you are just as angry as I am that the University has closed the central mall to parking.” This sentence will work if everyone who reads it shares your anger. However, if members of the audience are delighted not to have to fight traffic on the way to and from classes, then second person voice, rather than creating a friendly relationship, has just alienated that entire portion of the audience. Second person voice, so often associated with instructions and advice, can sound very condescending---not exactly the impression you are trying to make.
- First person voice creates a relationship of immediacy and sometimes intimacy. First person voice uses the pronouns I and we. Using first person voice assumes a certain closeness to the audience. When people write memoirs, they often use first person voice because it is appropriate for the genre and brings the reader into the writer’s experience. Arguments, too, can be written in first person voice, especially when the writer is addressing an audience of peers. Using the first person voice in this way allows the reader to personally propose a claim, and to retain responsibility for that claim as they carry on their argument. Whether or not first person voice is appropriate to what you are writing will, again, depend on the genre, your purposes, and the audience.