

Point of View

The Who's Who of Writing



Most students enter their composition classes with at least a basic understanding of point of view, but where earlier compositions may have taken a somewhat simple approach to it where consistency was the only important thing, in college composition, point of view – knowing the different points of view and applying them properly – can make a considerable difference in the grade you receive for your paper.

Knowing Which Person

The best way to think of point of view is to imagine a moment of conversation involving three people: the one speaking (the *first person*), the one being spoken to (the *second person*), and the observer of the conversation (the *third person*).

Each person in the conversation will be referred to in different ways. The *first person* (the one speaking) would use personal pronouns to refer to himself: *I*, *me*, and *my* or *mine*. If he's not alone in speaking, he might include plural pronouns like *we*, *us*, and *our*. The *second person*, on the other hand, would have pronouns spoken to her that directly identify her as the target audience: *you* or *your*. It's also possible that the second person doesn't even need to be addressed with pronouns – for instance, if instructions are being given (e.g. "Make sure to study for the test."). Finally, the *third person* would not be a direct party to the conversation and would be referred to using other pronouns like *he* or *hers* or *it* – or if it's plural, pronouns like *they* and *them*. Direct references (e.g. "The dog" or "Those wind chimes") are also third person.

The point of view can usually be identified by the pronouns (or lack thereof). First person is *self* (*I*, *me*, *my*, and *mine*) or a group that includes self (*we*, *us*, *our*, and *ours*). First person is typically used for personal writing such as a narrative or reader response. For papers that are *not* supposed to use first person, such as research papers and argumentative essays, it's important to avoid using plural first person when making generalizations ("our country," "we as Americans," etc.).

Second person is anything directed at the audience or reader. This includes statements with pronouns like *you* or *your*, but it can also be implied by a sentence form called *imperative mood*. Simply put, imperative mood is any time the audience is addressed in the form of a *command* or *instruction* (e.g. "Turn that music off!"). Second person point of view is rarely used in academic writing; the only time it's really appropriate is when the audience is known or present (as in a speech or a letter).

Third person, quite simply, is everything else. Anything not written in first person or second person is third person. Third person is the correct point of view for most academic writing: research papers, process analysis essays, argumentative essays, and most other types of composition. The easiest way to know whether a sentence is in third person is to look at it and ask yourself, "Do I refer to myself in this sentence? Am I directly addressing anyone or using *you* or *your*?" If "no" is the answer to those questions, the sentence is in third person.

Avoiding Second Person

One of the most important aspects of point of view is the nature of the second person. Because of its informal nature, second person perspective is almost never acceptable for an academic essay. While there are many nuanced reasons for this, it is primarily a matter of stylistic consciousness; when you write an essay, your full focus should be on the topic at hand. Unless your audience is directly in front of you (as in a speech) or is the direct, specific recipient of your words (as in a letter), you shouldn't use second person point of view because it is too conversational to fit with the detached nature of academic writing.

This confuses many students; second person point of view is conversational, and the idea that your words are not addressed to a specific person or even a specific audience can be a difficult concept to grasp. However, in most academic writing, that is precisely the case. Most academic writing should be written in *third person*. There are a few exceptions, such as the personal narrative (which is typically written in first person), but even they will usually not use second person.

Third person point of view is usually the most appropriate point of view. A common mistake that students make when writing is asking, "If I can't use 'you,' what do I replace it with?" That's not the best way to approach point of view; often, it leads to a clunky mess of a paper that's full of "one" and other obvious dodges. You don't want it to look like you've written an entire paper in second person and then swapped out all the instances of "you" with something else.

To avoid second person, you have to change the way you *think*. It means you need to break away from the conversation thought process and start thinking about the fact that you're talking *about something* rather than *to someone*. Simply replacing every "you" with "one," while not technically wrong, makes for a very weak paper.

WRONG: To make an apple pie, you have to gather the ingredients first.

WEAK: To make an apple pie, one must gather the ingredients first.

BETTER: Gathering the ingredients is the first step to making an apple pie.

In the above example, the first sentence would not be correct in an academic paper because it's in second person perspective. The second sentence isn't wrong, but it's not the best way to word the sentence; it's an accurate statement, but it's stylistically weak because it doesn't flow well – especially when linked to many similarly worded statements. The last sentence is the best of the three because "gathering the ingredients," which is the focal point of the sentence, is now also the grammatical subject.

Imperative Mood (Implied Second Person)

A common mistake – especially on the process analysis – is the assumption that if the paper doesn't contain *you* or *your*, it's correct. This is not the case; it is possible to write a paper entirely in second person without ever actually using *you* or *your*. Remember, second person point of view is anything that's directly addressed to your reader (much like this resource is directly addressed to you!). A common pitfall is to fall victim to the temptation to describe a process by giving instructions rather than explaining the process analytically.

If you're speaking or writing directly to your audience, you're using second person. One fairly easy way to determine if a sentence is using an imperative mood is to look for the subject of the sentence. If you can't find

the subject, it means your sentence is either a fragment (grammatically wrong) or an imperative (stylistically wrong).

Another way to spot a sentence in imperative mood is to look and see if the sentence starts with a verb. In English, subjects almost always come before verbs; if the sentence *begins* with a verb, the subject is usually implied to be “you,” even if “you” is not actually written. If you’ve written imperative mood into your paper, there is no “magic bullet” – no one single word or phrase you can use to fix it – because the entire sentence is structured around the fact that someone is being addressed. Usually, the only way to fix a sentence in imperative mood is to rewrite the sentence in the correct point of view.

IMPERATIVE (WRONG): After setting the oven to 350 degrees, place the cake in the oven and let it bake until it’s done.

INFORMATIVE (RIGHT): After setting the oven to 350 degrees, the baker places the cake in the oven and lets it bake until it’s done.

In the above examples, the first sentence is wrong because it’s given as an instruction. Unless your teacher has specifically asked for a second-person list of instructions, this is not correct. The second example is correct because it keeps the focus on the process instead of on the audience.

Another approach is to make the “steps” (for a process analysis) into the subjects of the sentences.

IMPERATIVE (WRONG): Once you’ve taken the cake out of the oven, let it cool and decorate it.

INFORMATIVE (RIGHT): Once the cake is out of the oven, the next steps are to let it cool and to decorate it.

In all of your papers, you need to keep the focus where it needs to be, and part of the way to do that is by using the correct point of view.

Further Reading

-Point of View (Stark State College Writing Center)

<https://www.starkstate.edu/public/system/uploads/files/Writing-Center/Point-of-View.pdf>