CHAPTER 9

The 'I' in academic writing

'I' – some people hate this word in academic writing – some people don't mind it at all. But this very short word can get you into all kinds of trouble in your essays. How can such a small thing cause so many issues? Well, academic writing seeks to reach objectivity. And in your essays your tutors often want to hear more about what you have read, rather than what you think. The problem is, they *do* want to know what you think, but sentences like 'I think…' are over simplistic, and so professors often ban the word 'I' 'and tell you to write only in the third person. They do this to help you build an academic writing style more easily, but it can mean you go missing from your work, so this chapter explores how to position yourself within your writing without using the dreaded 'I' word.

This chapter will examine using attributive verbs and hedging to create a sense of objectivity that allows you to seem less biased and, therefore, more credible – a key part of academic writing. It should be noted though, that not all writing needs to follow these principles, when working on reflective journals, or being asked specifically to express your opinions or to explore your own relationship to a piece of work, it is essential to write 'I' and use the first person. Most people find writing in the first person easier, which is why this chapter is going to concentrate on how to write in the third person, that way you're covered whatever the task.

The easiest way for us to explain this is to look at some examples, look at the difference between the two sentences below.

First person	Third person
Even though Smith thinks this way, *I* think his argument is incorrect.	Even though Smith thinks this way, *others* in the field disagree.

It is clear that the second sentence is more objective, and even if that isn't clear, trust me, it sounds much more traditionally academic than the first. Just writing in the third person though doesn't quite do everything we need. The third person makes us look objective, even when we are not. Instead we need to be clearer, and write both in the third person *AND* show our opinion. While this sounds hard, it is actually really exciting and this is where your writing starts to get really good. An important part of synthesizing text is deciding how much you agree (or disagree) with the claims other authors make. You need to show that position, even as you quote, summarize, or paraphrase your sources, as this will position you in the ongoing conversation.

To avoid adding an 'I think … ' sentence, we use **attributive verbs** (oow, fancy!) These are special words that show how much you agree or disagree with an idea. And they are not as hard to use as you think. In fact, you probably use them every day, but they do need some care and thought when you are using them in your writing.

Not everybody likes attributive verbs, Elmore Leonard (2010), an American novelist, who thought they were a real problem in writing novels once said, '[n]ever use a verb other than 'said' to carry dialogue. The line of dialogue belongs to the character; the verb is the writer sticking his [or her] nose in'.

This might be good advice for novelists, but it isn't very good advice for academics (we are into chapter 9 now, so you get to call yourself one of those). Leonard thought that the writer shouldn't try and influence the way a reader thought about the quote (he thought that was the author having too much influence), but in academic writing you need to do the opposite, you need to tell the reader just what you think about the quote through the use of attributive verbs. Why? Well because an academic essay is you adding to an ongoing conversation on your topic, and so we want to hear your voice. The word 'said' isn't helpful for us.

Attributive verbs at their simplest, signal that you, the writer, is quoting, paraphrasing, or referring to another source – something we must always do, as you know by now. 'Says' is the most common – and boring – attributive verb, but there are so many that we could use and they all have a special meaning and a special weight to them, meaning they show what you are thinking without you writing 'I think…'. Before we look at all of them, let's look at some simple examples of how they can change the meaning of a sentence. For instance, let's think about the differences between the following sentences:

> Jones (2012) **<u>said</u>** that social media is damaging for children.
> Jones (2012) **<u>shows</u>** that social media is damaging for children.
> Jones (2012) **<u>suggests</u>** that social media is damaging for children.

All three of these sentences would be acceptable ways to introduce Jones' ideas, and they are cited correctly too (well done!). The first though is very dull, and very neutral, it shows nothing of what you think about Jones' idea (Elmore would love it, but we don't). The second example is much stronger, here the reader will think that you find Jones' argument persuasive. Writing that someone **shows** something tells your reader that you think that the claim or idea is correct and that there is enough evidence to support it (see how clever these words are?). **Suggests** on the other hand gives you a way out, it tells the reader that you think the claim or idea might be wrong – careful though, because you aren't saying it *is* wrong, just that it is still open to debate. If you wanted to distance yourself even further, while again not specifically saying the writer is wrong, you could write 'Jones **seems to think** that social media is damaging for children'. Wow! Aren't these words great!

Here are some more examples:

Jones (2012) <u>asserts</u> that social media is damaging for children. That is, he makes a forceful statement but may not offer evidence to support it (or at least you don't find the evidence persuasive).

Jones (2012) <u>concludes</u> that social media is damaging for children.
Here we are saying that Jones has offered up a lot of clear evidence to reach a conclusion – again you don't have to agree, but you are acknowledging the evidence base.

Jones (2012) <u>points out</u> that social media is damaging for children.
In this case, you are suggesting that you think what Jones is saying is correct, and you are also expecting that your readers will agree.

There are so many exciting attributive verbs that you could use, but it is really important that you know what they mean, as they will be telling your readers what you think of the ideas. Use this table, adapted from Centralia (n.d.), to help you:

General attributive verbs:

Accepts	Decides	Offers
Acknowledges	Declares	Points out
Addresses	Defends	Proposes
Adds	Defines	Questions
Advises	Describes	Realizes
Allows	Discusses	Reasons
Analyzes	Echoes	Relates
Answers	Emphasizes	Remarks
Asks	Exclaims	Replies
Asserts	Explains	Reports
Assumes	Expresses	Responds
Assures	Finds	Reveals
Argues	Grants	Sees
Believes	Holds	Speculates
Categorizes	Hypothesizes	States
Challenges	Illustrates	Suggests
Charges	Implies	Supposes
Cites	Indicates	Thinks
Claims	Insists	Uses
Comments	Interprets	Utilizes
Compares	Introduces	Warns
Concedes	Lists	Wonders
Concludes	Maintains	Writes
Considers	Mentions	
Contends	Notes	
Deals with	Observes	

Showing agreement:

Affirms	Concurs with	Supports
Agrees	Confirms	Verifies
Concedes	Echoes	

Showing disagreement:

Condemns	Derides	Opposes
Counters	Disagrees	Refutes
Criticizes	Disputes	Rejects
Denies	Objects	

Adapted from Centralia (n.d.).

Attributive verbs are one of your most powerful tools in positioning yourself in your research, and in case you haven't guessed yet, one of my favourite parts of the English language and academic writing. But you must be careful! These words are fantastic because they all have very specific meanings, however that can also get you into trouble if you are not sure what those meanings are. If you aren't sure then use a dictionary to check before you use the word. Also be aware that some verbs require special sentence structures – sadly it isn't possible to just swap 'says' for all of the words above, for example, the verb 'accounts for' must be followed by a noun. And we haven't even looked at all the words, there are actually more than 300 attributive verbs in English (wow!). So, there are plenty of exciting ways to introduce ideas in your work, but you have to select the right one to show your thoughts about the texts you have read. These verbs are your best friend in showing your opinion in your essays without getting told off for bringing non-academic sentences that start 'I think…' into your work.

Hedging your bets

Another good way to show your thoughts and opinions is to use what is called *hedging* to show how much you agree with an idea you are writing about. A hedge can change very forceful statements into much softer ones, and shows you are aware that there are other ideas and opinions out there. So, you can change words from *will*, to *may* or *might*. Or you could write *some* instead of *all*. Or even include an extra word where there wasn't one before. Compare these two sentences:

- Social media triggers mental health issues.
- Social media *may* trigger mental health issues.

The first sentence suggests high level of certainty, it is presented as a fact. The second sentence, is more tentative, meaning you are less sure, suggesting that mental health issues will occur only in certain circumstances or under certain

conditions, but not necessarily all the time. The first statement would also be difficult to defend, but the second could be argued more easily.

Hedging then allows us to make claims based on how much evidence we actually have, and you will know how much evidence there is because of your notetaking. So if there is a lot of evidence for something, then we can use strong language to show that, but if something is less sure, or doesn't happen all the time, then we can hedge the language to show that is the case, and this helps to avoid, or at least reduce, criticism of your work. As with the attributive verbs though, there are huge numbers of words and phrases we can choose from, and it is important to choose one that accurately represents what you are trying to say.

Let's look at a few examples, the use of the word 'probably' in the sentence below indicates that the evidence is fairly strong. In the second sentence, the more tentative word 'could' was selected, indicating that the evidence is weak.

- The traditional newspaper's demise was **probably** caused by increases in online news sources.
- The demise of traditional newspapers **could** have been caused by increases in online news sources.

Hedging can also be used when an idea has been later changed or refuted;

- Johnson (2007) **appears to** ignore the adverse psychological side-effects selfie culture.
- The role of social media in protests **may** have been overstated.

A wide range of words and phrases can be used in hedging:		
Modal auxiliary verbs: can, could, may, might, should, would	**Other modal verbs:** appear, look, seem, tend	**Probability adjectives:** likely, possible, probable, unlikely
Probability adverbs: perhaps, possibly, probably, presumably	**Frequency adverbs:** generally, usually, often, occasionally, seldom	

The attributive verb you choose can also be a way of hedging. Consider the difference in the relative certainty of these two sentences:

A new report proves that some students may not be studying effectively for exams.

A new report hints that some students may not be studying effectively for exams.

This is all pretty exciting (if you ask me). Even with all of this though, especially in your longer essays, it can be easy to lose your voice among all the other voices (texts) you are using to answer the question, and we really don't want to lose you totally. One way to make sure you are always still included, is to give yourself the opening statement for each paragraph. That doesn't mean starting each paragraph with 'I think…', but instead you can make each opening sentence something you believe, or a stance you are taking, and then back this up with the evidence of other writers afterwards – using the attributive verbs to further connect their ideas with your opening statement. See chapter 6 for an idea of what this might look like.

> **TOP TIPS**
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> There are some attributive verbs that get used a lot by students, but which don't really mean very much. Words like 'say' and 'mention' are almost as unhelpful as the word said. And the phrase 'according to' sounds quite academic, but really it just means said. Try using more specific attributive verbs to really help tell your story, to show how much you agree with an idea, and then get your opinion into your work.

Your lecturers are right, you shouldn't be using the word 'I' in academic writing and sentences like 'I think …' or 'In my opinion … ' are not academic in style and should be avoided. But unlike Elmore Leonard suggests, in academic writing it is really important to show you have a voice and to show both how you are contributing to the greater academic conversation, and how much you are agreeing with the ideas of other writers and researchers. Attributive verbs and hedging language are the best tools available to do this. So, stick your nose in, join the conversation and tell us what you think. Just don't write 'I think … '.

References

Centralia (n.d.). Verbs of attribution. Online Writing Lab (OWL) [Online] Available from: http://owl.centralia.edu/handouts/verbsatrib.pdf Accessed January 2019.

Leonard, E. (2010) Elmore Leonard's rules for writers. The Guardian [Online] Available from: https://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/feb/24/elmore-leonard-rules-for-writers Accessed March 2019.