

Things to Eliminate in Your Writing:

Writing in First Person

Part I: What is it?



Okay, here's a confession. I'm not really asking you to eliminate first person in your writing, just to eliminate it for a certain type of writing task in a certain context (the short form literary essay in a high school class).

When the task is to convince someone that a piece of literature conveys X meaning because of the way that it is written, references to yourself are out of place.

The way this manifests is in the use of "I," "me," "my," "mine," "we," "our," "ours," and "us" pronouns. This is first person.

It also manifests by implication when you refer to yourself in an essay or identify yourself as part of some collective whole (such as when you start pontificating about human nature).

For our purposes, this sort of thing needs to go away.



**Part II:
Why is this a problem?**



Problem One: It's Off Topic

I've already alluded to this in the explanation. If your task is prove that X meaning is created through the way a text is put together, the topic is the text's handling of the information that it includes.* Things to write about are the manner in which this information is presented, the structure of the information in relation to the greater whole, and why this particular information was included to convey this particular meaning.

In other words, you are being tasked with discussing the craft of the writing. You are not being tasked with discussing your reaction to the writing.

There are, of course, writing genres where personal reaction is appropriate. If you were asked to write some kind of reader-response or a review, for instance, then your reactions would be just as important as the text to which you are responding.

However, I will not ask you to do this sort of thing, and neither will the AP test.

* Pro-tip: This will be the task in this class roughly 95% of the time. The sooner you internalize this, the sooner you will start being rewarded with better grades.

Problem Two: It's Redundant

Occasionally I'll still see student writing that includes phrases like "I think" or "from this I take away the idea that" or "I understand this to mean." This usually happens in lower grades, but it sometimes happens at this level too-- though by now most students understand that doing this irritates the teacher, so they no longer do it (even if they don't understand why).

One obvious problem with this sort of thing is that it adds no new information. Of course you "think" it: you're writing it. Of course you "take away" X idea: you're explaining that idea in the writing. Of course you "understand" something to mean something: you're detailing the inferences in your explanations.

If I say, "X politician is the worst thing to happen to this country since The Transformers movie franchise," does it add anything to the content of that statement to start that phrase with "I think?" If I didn't think it, why would I be saying it in the first place?

And if I'm not going to give reasons and develop the comparison, then saying "I think this" does not insulate me from charges of being a self-important ass who can't back up his opinions. You can either back up your claims or you can't. If you can't back them up, drawing attention to the fact that "It's just my opinion" doesn't give you a free pass to spout off about things you obviously do not understand-- and, yes, if you can't explain it, you don't really understand it.

Problem Three: Nobody Cares What You Think

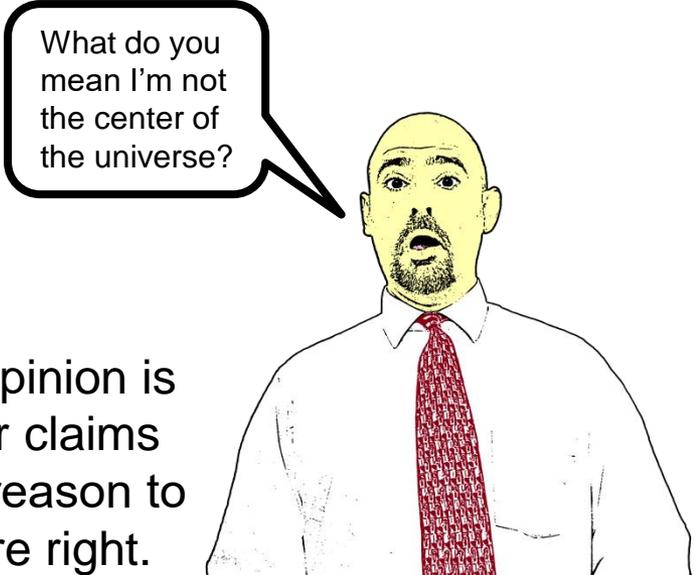
I know it's easy to get the impression that the world caters to your needs and is waiting with bated breath to hear your grand pronouncements on life.

The reality is: nobody cares.

Or, more accurately, nobody cares in this context. You're a kid in a high school class. Your "thoughts" about literature aren't particularly relevant or interesting. It is extremely unlikely that you're an expert, and chances are that you have only the vaguest notion about the cultural context in which the text was produced; the sorts of other texts to which the text is responding; or the body of work to which the text belongs. In short, you're almost certainly profoundly ignorant.

I know we live in a world where vacuous non-entities make whole careers out of "giving their take" on things about which they have only the most superficial knowledge. Fortunately for my sanity, an English class is not one of those arenas.

An English essay is not a reaction video, and your opinion is only relevant to the extent that you can back up your claims with evidence and explanation. As such, there's no reason to reference your own reactions. Just prove that you are right.



What do you mean I'm not the center of the universe?

Concession: In Which I Slightly Dial Back the Cynicism

Time for another confession: actual literary critics break this rule. They sometimes evaluate the works in personal terms, and they sometimes use first person pronouns.

What they are doing, however, is different from what you are doing.

- First, their task is seldom as narrow as yours. Sure, there's a lot of overlap, but they are usually not laser-focused on how craft reveals meaning in a text.
- Second, they are almost always developing ideas at much greater length. A personal anecdote or reference is not out of place in a four hundred page book. It is hugely out of place in a four paragraph essay. You don't have the same freedom to meander. It takes up valuable real estate in the essay.
- Third, they are experts in the field. They've read a lot, and they know what they're talking about. Their opinions and reactions actually hold weight.
- Fourth, I do not exempt myself from this rule. When I'm doing the same task as you (writing about how text construction creates text meaning), I don't interject myself into that discussion either. Compared to you, I'm an expert, but the reality is, outside of this class, there's no reason why anybody should be terribly interested in my "insights" either.

Problem Four: What is wrong with “We can see?”

I get this sometimes from people who do speech events, especially extemporaneous speaking. The reason for this is that mediocre extempers pepper their analysis with “we can see” whenever they want to draw a conclusion. It’s a lazy rhetorical tic, and everything I write here about why it should go away in your writing applies equally to this particular speech event.

The problem with the “from this we can see” transition is that it presumes agreement before you have actually convinced anyone. What you really mean is “from this *I* can see,” since you’re the one drawing the conclusion. Pretending that your reader (or audience) is already on the same page is just a ham-fisted way of trying to be convincing without actually having done the hard work of being convincing. Just *saying* it does not translate into agreement, and it is insulting to the reader (or audience) to just assume there is agreement--insulting because it is so transparently manipulative. Who is this “we” anyway? Why do *I* have to agree? Even if I do agree, who are *you* to speak for me?

Either your argument is persuasive or it isn’t. Don’t insult my intelligence by *telling* me it is persuasive by including me in your “we.”

Problem Five: Grand Pronouncements about Human Nature

This is more a related problem, but it does imply an insertion of self and presumed agreement, much like the royal “we” of Problem Four.

Here’s an example of what I am talking about from a student from Reagan High School in Austin, TX:

In the face of tragedy, as he loses all faith in the institutions he once trusted, Hamlet is forced to evaluate himself, causing an inner conflict that overshadows the external conflict. Through his struggle, he comes to realize that he must create his own ideals, his own decisions, and ultimately, his own destiny. Despite the institutions that influence he decisions, he must face the existential responsibility of defining himself, **as it is the essence of humanity.**

Here it’s a minor blemish in an otherwise excellent conclusion, but the problem is that there’s absolutely zero reason why the writer has any credibility to define what it means to be human or pop-off about human nature. The more education you have, the more you come to understand that virtually nobody defends these kind of universal norms anymore. This is true whether I’m speaking in a cultural, psychological, or biological sense, because such ideas simply don’t hold up to scrutiny, or (at the very least) they are unfalsifiable (and, hence, can’t be tested).

As such, your “take” on what it means to be human is misplaced, and it is equally misplaced to presume I (the reader) agree with this take.

Part III: What to do Instead



Solution One: Eliminate First Person Pronouns

“I,” “me,” “my,” “mine,” “we,” “our,” “ours,” and “us” (and their less common cousins) need to go away in the type of writing you will be doing in this class.

Reader-reaction criticism and reviews are a different beast altogether, but you won't be writing any of these in this class or on the AP test. That means you don't have to worry about when referring to yourself is appropriate or not. For our purposes, it never will be.

Solution Two: Don't Treat a Literary Essay Like a Reaction Video

Your job is not to walk the reader through your reactions to the text.

If you do this, you are not performing the assigned task, and your grade will reflect your lapse in judgment. As someone who has scored AP test essays for College Board, I can tell you with complete confidence that essays of this sort do not score above a 4 (out of a 9 point rubric), and most of the time they are 2s and 3s. This is not getting the job done if you want to pass.

Solution Three: Do not Presume Agreement

References to “we” treats your reader like a child being told what to think. Don’t do this crap. It doesn’t build ethos; it tanks it.

If you are tempted to use the “from this we can see” transition, substitute “the reader” for *we* and “understands” or “realizes” for *can see*-- and then make damn sure that your conclusion is reasonable enough that it *does* follow that the typical reader would understand the text in that way.

Solution Four: Don't Define Human Nature

This is above your pay grade.

I like a good cheesy conclusion as much as the next guy, one that really digs into the thematic content of the text, but when you start connecting the text to what defines us as a species, you're treading on some really thin ice. Worse, you're just inviting me (the reader) to disagree with your assessment as to what connects me to you. You're never going to actually defend the notion anyway, so it's silly to even include it.

The solution is to scale back your rhetoric a tad. To return to the example that I included for Problem Five, the writer's real assertion is that *Shakespeare* uses *Hamlet* to argue that intentional self-definition is the essence of humanity. That's actually defensible, and, more importantly, it is what the original essay was actually about.

DON'T BE
THIS GUY



This
conclusion is
turned up to
eleven!!!



Part IV: Conclusions



Conclusions

Do not use first person pronouns for the writing you will be doing in this class.

Do not use first person pronouns on the AP exam.

Do not mistake the writing task for a chance to give your “take” on the text.

Do not use the “we can see” transition.

Do not make conjecture about humanity or human nature in your discussion of theme. Scale it back to what the author believes about the idea.