

BEING PERSONAL OR BEING IMPERSONAL

Both overly personal and highly impersonal styles can emphasize aspects that distract from your main message. Impersonal writing relies heavily on the passive voice, with all its weaknesses, and personal writing tends to foster deadwood.

WRITING ABOUT PEOPLE

When fitting, feel free to write about people. You will help your readers relate to what you are saying. Forget the superstition that scientific objectivity demands impersonal writing. The scientist's writing style does not make his work objective. His technique and findings do that. If similar techniques can validate his findings, there is objectivity. But for this validation he must convey precise information, describing clearly what he has done and found. Since he can sometimes do this best by writing about human beings he should — and does — write about them. Readers can more readily picture persons acting than events that just happen with out anyone doing anything.

So use the names of people; write about "our engineers," "we," and "you." And even use "I"—where it is accurate and fitting and not just egocentric display.

The legitimacy of personal writing should not be taken as a license for egocentricity. Technical writing must concentrate on the subject matter, not on the writer. It should not become a vehicle for personal expression.

Nor should this legitimacy conflict with long-found organizational practices. Many scholarly journals have editorial policies that shun personal forms as the surest way to avoid extremely personal writing. When writing for such publications, you can still use expressions like "this writer" or "the present author(s)."

PEOPLE MENTIONED IN THE SENTENCE

The following problem sentences, while passive in voice, do refer to people, but the people underplay their role. Rewrite the sentences in the active voice. For example

Change: The findings were studied by the research team.
To: The research team studied the findings.

Note the increased directness of the personal form.

Rewrite in Active Voice

The set having this logic was preferred by *half the listeners*.

Half the listeners preferred the set with this logic.

The measurements were made by *Professor L. Mancini*.

Professor L. Mancini made the measurements.

Extracting the information has been shown by *our engineers* to be simple and easy.

Our engineers have shown that extracting the information is simply and easy.

The limitations on power from a back-biased photodiode and on its information bandwidth from the lumped-constant, equivalent-circuit parameters have been discussed by several authors.

Several authors have discussed the limitations on power from a back-biased photodiode and on its information bandwidth from the lumped-constant, equivalent-circuit parameters.

Specifying who acted often gives important information.

From these results it was decided that...

might be written—if relevant—to tell who did the deciding:

The present writers (We, Our staff) decided that...

Similarly,

The proposed communication system includes transportable subsystems.

which does not say whose was the proposed system, might be more meaningful as:

Our(Their) proposed...system includes...

"YOU" INSTEAD OF "IT" AND "THERE" PASSIVES

Addressing your readers directly as "you" relates them immediately to your message, which is especially important in instructions. The following sentences with their "it" and "there" and passives are indirect. Use "you" as the subject, and rewrite them in the active voice, so that they speak directly to the reader. For example, write:

It will be seen that...

with "you" as:

You will see that...

Rewrite in Active Voice, With "You" Written In

It will be recalled that ordinarily the D₂ line is not recommended for optical pumping of cesium.

You will recall that ordinarily the D₂ line is not recommended for optical pumping of cesium.

It will be seen that the clock pulse combines with nonclock time-data elements.

You will see that the clock pulse combines with nonclock time-data elements.

It can be seen that the pattern had sixteen transitions for thirty-two bits.

You will see that the pattern had sixteen transitions for thirty-two bits.

A soft cloth should be used to remove the dust.

You should use a soft cloth to remove the dust.

IMPERATIVES

Many sentences like the last one are really intended as commands or instructions, but they only hint at that by their use of "must," "should," and "have to." They should be written as imperatives. Sentences such as:

A soft cloth should be used (You should use a soft cloth) to remove the dust.

become imperatives as:

Use a soft cloth to remove...

The subject, "you," is understood in imperatives: "[You] Use a soft cloth..." Similarly, statements of fact, such as:

Operation of the card reader is as follows:

When intended as instructions, such sentences should be made imperatives:

Operate the card reader as follows:

Note that the imperative verb is at the beginning of the imperative sentence.

Rewrite As Imperatives

As you work with these sentences note the immediacy of the imperative in contrast with the roundabout original.

Vacuum deposition must be used. → Use vacuum deposition.

Consideration *should be given* to alternatives.

Give consideration to (Consider) alternatives.

It *should be noted* that the listed weights exceed those in the specifications.

Note that the listed weights exceed those in the specifications.

Continuity *is checked* with the wire-connection list and the cabling diagram.

Check continuity with the wire-connection list and the cabling diagram.

The module *is removed* by loosening the hold-down screws and pulling the module from the enclosure.

Remove by loosening the hold-down screws and pulling the module from the enclosure. [OR]

Remove the module by loosening the hold-down screws and pulling it from the enclosure.

The logic chassis and the tube chassis *are aligned* as a unit.

Align the logic chassis and the tube chassis as a unit.

The power level can be adjusted by varying the beam voltage.

Adjust the power level by varying the beam voltage

Extreme caution should be exercised.

Exercise extreme caution.

Make warnings and cautions like the one in the preceding sentence directly to the point. Rather than wordy epistles like:

WARNING: Upon application of power, voltages dangerous to life exist within this assembly. Failure to observe the necessary precautions may result in death or severe burns to personnel.

Get it out immediately:

DANGER: Voltages in this assembly can kill.

Instead of a roundabout:

If odor of gas is present, put on gas mask before entering building.

Be concrete:

If you smell gas, put on your gas mask before entering the building.

BEING IMPERSONAL

In the first part of this handout I recommended personal pronouns and names because of their directness and accuracy and because attempts to avoid them lead to strained, roundabout phrasing and heavy reliance on passive voice. But, though personal forms are proper (unless your organization or publication discourages them), you should use them only when they aid in getting your message across. Do not force them into your writing in a strained attempt to be personal.

STATEMENTS OF FACT VERSUS PERSONAL OBSERVATIONS

Remarks about feelings and beliefs should be brought out explicitly when they are central: "Our engineers *feel* that..." and in conflicts of view: "Their engineers *believe* that..., but ours *believe* that...: In other situations, make objective statements and shun subjective ones, such as those about beliefs and feelings.

Often you can change personal observations to statements of fact by a mere deletion:

~~It is felt that~~ such devices are needlessly complex.

~~Our engineers feel that~~ their tied columns are too weak.

What remains is a simple statement of fact.

The following sentences also make observations about facts usually at the beginning of the sentence. Delete the observation element so that you leave just the statement of fact. When reviewing the sentences you transform, concentrate on the change in point of view—from personal to factual.

Delete the Observation Part of the Statement

You should note that logic changes do not occur until the cycle ends.

Logic changes do not occur until the cycle ends.

Our staff plans that Mr. Smith will be the key investigator for the proposed program.

Mr. Smith will be the key investigator for the proposed program

We believe that these components will be available in June.

Our inspectors feel that the number of undetected doubles is excessive.

These components will be available in June

It has been observed that sometimes a higher current is drawn.

Sometimes a higher current is drawn.

REMOVING "ONE"

Statements that rely on "one" are about as impersonally personal as English can get. For a more personal tone, you can usually change "one" to "we" or "you":

One (We, You) can either reduce M or increase P.

For an impersonal statement, you can sometimes delete the "one" expression:

~~One can~~ either reduce M or increase P.

This sentence is still personal: "you" is understood: "[You] Either reduce..." But in the following sentences, removing "one" develops impersonal statements.

Make Impersonal by Deleting the "One" Expression

More than efficiency is needed if one is to extend frequency response.

More than efficiency is needed ~~if one is to~~ extend frequency response

This integration gives one the following formula.

This integration gives ~~one~~ the following formula.

Figure 6 shows the video data one can expect from a typical target.

Figure 6 shows the video data ~~one can expect~~ from a typical target.

Some sentences need extensive rewriting to reduce their personal tone. For example, to remove "one" from sentences like:

One must be able to produce predictable, repeatable electric properties in these devices.

You have to write something like this:

The electric properties of these devices must be predictable and repeatable" or "These devices need..."

REMOVING VERBS SUGGESTIVE OF HUMAN ACTIVITY

In the following sentence, the word "made" hints at human activity:

Recent improvements made in this vocoder have...resulted in word-intelligibility rates of..."

In sales proposals or requests for support, it might be important to note who made the improvements—"made by our engineers" or "made by our competitors." But the failure to mention the actor shows what is often true—that this is merely deadwood, a phony attempt to turn an impersonal message into a personal one. Impersonal statements can be made by deleting these verbs when they are unnecessary.

Recent improvements ~~made~~ in this vocoder have...resulted in word-intelligibility rates of..."

Delete Unnecessary Personal Verbs

Experiments done during this reporting period were more definitive.

Experiments ~~done~~ during this reporting period were more definitive.

The work performed on this project included site preparation, installation, checkout, and demonstration.

The work ~~performed~~ on this project included site preparation, installation, checkout, and demonstration.

Immediately report improvements or delays detected.

Immediately report improvements or delays ~~detected~~. [OR] Report improvements or delays immediately.

The substrates used were ordinary glass slides.

The substrates ~~used~~ were ordinary glass slides.

By removing the pseudohuman verbs from the following sentences, you will be developing another verb, an impersonal one, in its place.

Thin gold films ~~are found~~ to conduct differently.

Unlike "are found," "conduct" does not imply human activity. Sometimes the new, neutral verb will have to be rewritten slightly, as in:

The structure ~~was found to depend~~ (depended) on the temperature of the substrate.

You can bypass much pseudopersonalizing by replacing verbs that hint at human activity with neutral ones. Rather than:

An absorption cell was placed in front of the laser.

In which "was placed" looks to someone who did the placing, you can stress either the cell:

An absorption cell *stood* in front of the laser.

Or you can stress the laser:

The laser *faced* an absorption cell.

Neither sentence implies human activity: The cell stands, the laser faces.

MAKE IMPERSONAL BY DELETING A VERB

The viewing hood will be made collapsible. (Not "will collapse")

~~The viewing hood will be collapsible.~~

The modification kit will be provided in a form that is easy to install.

~~The modification kit will be easy to install.~~

The technical details are thought to be fully responsive to the bid request.

~~The technical details are thought to be fully responsive to the bid request. [OR, better still]~~

~~The technical details respond fully to the bid request.~~

Complete solid-solution formation was found to occur in all six systems.

~~Complete solid-solution formation occurred in all six systems.~~

Limit words like "seems" and "tends" to their proper subjective uses—to give, for example, listeners' reports of differences in sound. But then, in that case, have the statement note the subjective nature of the evaluation. Not just, "the new speaker seems to.." but "according to listeners the new speaker seems to..." Further, make these observations as objective as possible: If you can, specify how many listeners reported one way and how many reported otherwise.

A statement of purpose or of intention is relevant in developing contrasts, such as:

The address reader *was designed to* recognize printed addresses; it also happens to read typewritten ones.

These allusions are often unnecessary and pseudopersonal and can raise a dangerous question: "It was designed to do that, but does it?" Such open statements can seriously undercut proposals and marketing pieces.

Remove intent and similar expressions from the following problem sentences; for example:

The address reader was designed to recognize (recognizes)

Rewrite Impersonally

The first circuit is intended to prevent double transfers between the R units.

~~The first circuit prevents double transfers between the R units.~~

"Real time" is defined as the time during which physical operations can be influenced.

~~"Real time" is the time during which physical operations can be influenced.~~

The arcing appears when the lower half of the screen is chosen for expansion.

~~The arcing appears when the lower half of the screen is expanded.~~

The processing is directed toward increasing catalytic activity on the surface of the nickel oxide.

~~The processing increases catalytic activity on the surface of the nickel oxide.~~

REMOVING "THE PURPOSE OF" AND "THE FUNCTION OF"

Remove unnecessary expressions of purpose in the same way as you removed pseudopersonal verbs.

The purpose of this test is to develop criteria for the final design.

becomes:

This test develops criteria for the final design.

Rewrite Without Words Like "Function" and "Purpose"

The purpose of this glossary is to explain the terms most commonly used in artificial intelligence.

The glossary explains the terms most commonly used in artificial intelligence.

The function of the editor is to clean up the manuscript.

The editor cleans up the manuscript.

It is the function of the fault register to indicate the type of error.

The fault register indicates the type of error.

The objective of the proposed program will be to establish acoustic parameters for a speech-recognition system.

The proposed program will establish acoustic parameters for a speech-recognition system.

Rewrite Impersonally

The function of the Preamble is to frame the recognition system with the start generator.

The Preamble frames the recognition system with the start generator.

The campondor is designed to operate on a four-wire basis on the line side and on either a two- or a four-wire basis on the drop side.

The campondor operates on a four-wire basis on the line side and on either a two- or a four-wire basis ...

The purpose of the input-output processor is to control communications.

The input-output processor controls communications.

The function of the mode selector and the one-bit storage register is to provide means for increasing transient response.

The mode selector and the one-bit storage register provide means for increasing transient response.

A power amplifier is defined as an amplifier that delivers high power, as opposed to high voltage or high current.

A power amplifier is an amplifier that delivers high power, as opposed to high voltage or high current.

Rewrite More Personally With Suggested Subjects

The drafting of the circuit board will be completed. (Our employees)

It is assumed that the error angle represents the zero phase. (We)

A six-letter-per-second drum inserter is now being designed. (Their department is now)

It is recommended that you install another high-current distribution panel. (The authors, present tense)

Rewrite As Imperatives

Remember, imperative sentences usually start with verbs; the subject, "you," is understood: "[You] Halt!" In becoming imperatives at least one word in the following sentences becomes superfluous, usually words like "must" or "should."

Both the chassis are replaced if trouble appears.

Replace chassis if trouble appears.

Care must be exercised in performing these tests.

Exercise care in performing these tests. **OR** Be careful when performing these tests.

It should be noted that this system refines the raw parameters by preprocessing and normalizing.

Note that this system refines the raw parameters by preprocessing and normalizing.

A point to keep in mind is that the phase shift does not of itself distort the output.

Keep in mind that the phase shift does not of itself distort the output.

However, it must be remembered that these were calculated by hand.

However, remember that these were calculated by hand.

Delete Personal Elements

~~Experience has shown that~~ either method of defining lines needs the same amount of hardware.

~~It should be noted that~~ the numeric drum storage has a code number.

~~It will be seen that~~ the clock pulse combines with nonclock time-data elements.

~~It is known that~~ heat increases resistance.

~~It is felt that~~ a simple design will save money.

Rewrite Impersonally

The character reader is designed to recognize characters in two steps.

~~The character reader recognizes characters in two steps.~~

This circuit offers a reduction in the hardware in the comparison network.

~~This circuit reduces the hardware in the comparison network.~~

Inspection of equations 5 and 7 shows that we have yet to find the variables.

~~Equations 5 and 7 show that we have yet to find the variables.~~

A space charge is defined as a charge of electricity distributed throughout a three-dimensional medium.

~~A space charge is a charge of electricity distributed throughout a three-dimensional medium.~~

The new method offers increased performance.

~~The new method increases performance.~~