



Faculty of Engineering  
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## SOUNDING OBJECTIVE & IMPERSONAL

A common feature of many technical documents is that they are written in a way that sounds objective and unbiased. One of the key methods of accomplishing this is by avoiding the use of personal pronouns. This document covers how to replace personal pronouns by refocusing sentences and using the passive voice.

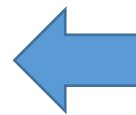
### PERSONAL PRONOUNS

You may have noticed that technical documents, such as journal articles and technical manuals, are written in a "matter of fact" way. This style of writing is achieved by not using personal pronouns, so these documents do not sound like stories or narratives; rather, technical documents sound like factual accounts of an event that transpired, or objective descriptions of an object or a process.

Most technical writing avoids first-person pronouns:

First-person singular: I/my/me

First-person plural: We/our/us



Try not to use these in  
technical documents!

Instinctually, you might want to use these since you had the experiences about which you are writing. However, by using these pronouns (or any other word you would substitute for yourself), you make your writing sound more subjective, as if what you are saying is only based on your experiences and thoughts rather than a more factual account of how something is.

Consider this example:

**I found that the polyimide adhesive was the most reliable in the tests.**

Here it sounds like the idea that polyimide adhesive is the most reliable option is just an opinion based on your experiences. It could be weakened even more by using a phrase like "in my opinion" or an adverb like "personally." Technical writing should sound more confident than just mere opinions, even if what you are writing is an opinion. To sound more objective, you can either refocus the sentence or use the passive voice.

### REFOCUSING A SENTENCE

This strategy involves changing the subject of the sentence so that you are no longer using yourself as the subject.

**The test results indicated that the polyimide adhesive was the most reliable.**

The focus of the sentence is changed to what the results indicated, thus avoiding mentioning you personally. The sentence is still based on your results, so it is not some kind of universal fact that polyimide adhesive is the most reliable adhesive. However, it does **sound** more certain than if you started the sentence with "I."

## USING THE PASSIVE VOICE

Microsoft Word will often tell you to avoid the use of the passive voice. While this is good advice for some types of writing, technical writing often uses the passive voice to replace sentences that have personal pronouns.

**It was found that the polyimide adhesive was the most reliable in the tests.**

**Polyimide adhesive was found to be the most reliable in the tests.**

There are two ways to construct sentences in the passive. The first is to change the subject to "it" followed by a verb in the passive + "that." Then a normal sentence will follow. Common verbs to be used in this way include *determine*, *discover*, *establish*, and *find*. Putting a verb in the passive requires using the verb "be" and the past participle. Some examples are listed in the table below.

Active	Passive
researched	was/were researched
are studying	is/are being studied
will have taken	will have been taken

The second example above shows that sometimes another noun can be placed in the subject position. In this case, that noun is not the "doer" of the action; it is the "receiver," and actions are done to it.

*Water quickly dissolved the adhesive* → *The adhesive was quickly dissolved by water.*

The agent is the noun that actually does the action. You can identify the agent in a passive sentence as it is usually preceded by the word "by." These must be stated when it is not obvious who actually did the action.

*The adhesives were manufactured in Wales **by workers.*** ← Here the agent is obvious, so omit.

*The adhesives were manufactured in Wales by retired engineers.* ← Not obvious, so use agent.

In technical writing, when the passive is used to replace a personal pronoun, it would be counterproductive to add the agent (orange). Passive is used here to **avoid** using personal pronouns.

*I tested multiple adhesives* → *Multiple adhesives were tested **by me.*** → *Multiple adhesives were tested.*

## SPECIAL NOTE: THE USE OF "YOU"

This document mostly mentioned the use of first-person pronouns. It should also be noted that the second person, you, also sounds less formal, and it should be avoided when possible. In writing when describing how a process should be done, the imperative (1) or passive (2) should be used instead. In addition to sounding more formal (much like an instruction manual), it also avoids the problem of using "you" when the reader is not the person who will be doing the work.

You should apply the adhesive directly to the surface.

1. Directly apply the adhesive to the surface.

2. The adhesive should be directly applied to the surface.