"At first I thought… but I don't know for sure": The Use of First Person Pronouns in the Academic Writing of Novices

Teresa Thonney, Columbia Basin College

Abstract: This article describes a study of how students use first person pronouns in papers written for undergraduate courses in multiple disciplines. If prompted, students imitate some of the ways experts use first person to establish their authority; but just as often students use first person pronouns to express uncertainty or to reveal that they have less status than their audience. I argue that we can help students more closely approximate expert practices by making them aware of how experts use first person and by providing them with opportunities to use first person in those same ways.

One of the most obvious ways writers insert themselves into texts is through first person pronouns. The functions these pronouns serve in academic writing range from low risk purposes, such as announcing topics or describing research methods, to high risk purposes, such as making original claims.

Some high risk functions of first person are illustrated in the following passage from the introduction of an article published in *Geography*:

> In the paradigm of Hawaiian volcano evolution, stages and the timing of their [magmas'] transitions are delimited by the composition of erupted lavas. However, *we* present new results from ^{238}U-^{230}Th and U-Pb dating of zircons from leucocratic plutonic xenoliths indicating that lava stratigraphy is an incomplete monitor of magmatic evolution within subsurface reservoirs. *Our* results indicate that diorites from Mauna Kea record postshield evolution over tens of thousands of years when the depth of magma storage increased and highly evolved lavas began erupting [emphasis added]. (Vazquez, Shamberger, & Hammer, 2007, p. 695)

In this passage, first person pronouns establish the writers as authorities, responsible for original research and new knowledge (*we present new results*; *our results indicate*).

Many students, having been taught by teachers or textbooks that academic writing should be impersonal, are reluctant to insert themselves into their academic writing in the way experts do. Some were raised in cultures that value collective rather than individual expressions of identity. Others may use first person but not in the ways an expert would. The passage below, for example, is also from the introduction of a paper about the evolution of a volcano, this paper written by a student

Across the Disciplines wac.colostate.edu/atd
A Journal of Language, Learning and Academic Writing ISSN 554-8244
DOI: https://doi.org/10.37514/ATD-J.2013.10.1.03

enrolled in Physical Geography 101. The student uses first person pronouns for different purposes than we saw in the previously quoted passage:

> Mount Adams is located in the Gifford Pinchot National Forest and has a top elevation of 12,726 feet. *I* can testify to the height because *I* climbed every foot of that mountain. At the time, *I* had thought *I* knew everything about Mount Adams; however, after researching Mount Adams, *I* realized *I* knew very little. What *I* didn't know is that Mount Adams is the second highest peak in Washington State and the third highest in the Cascade Range [emphasis added]. In addition, Mount Adams is one of 20 major volcanoes created by the subduction of a tectonic plate named Juan de Fuca… .

Like the experts, the student uses first person to make a claim, but the basis of his claim is different. When he writes, "I can testify," he makes a claim based on personal experience; the experts, conversely, base their claim on scientific research. Later, the student uses first person to admit the limitations of his knowledge and to deny having any authority (*I realized I knew very little*). The experts use first person to take credit for creating knowledge.

In this article, I describe the identities students create for themselves with first person pronouns, identities that often reveal their novice disciplinary status. I argue that we can help students more closely approximate expert practices by making them aware of how experts use first person and by providing them with opportunities to use first person in those same ways.

How Experts Use First Person

A number of studies have demonstrated how expert academic writers use first person pronouns to make their writing more persuasive. Nigel Harwood (2007), for example, asked political scientists to talk about the first person pronouns in their articles and in the articles of the other scholars interviewed. The political scientists identified seven reasons for using first person:

- To include the reader
- To make the writing more accessible and "friendly"
- To qualify claims (*I think* …)
- To identify research methods (*I sampled* …)
- To announce their purpose or argument (*In this essay, I will* …)
- To establish the originality or value of their research (*We present new results* …)
- To insert personal comments.

Comments from the interviews highlight the role these writers believe first person pronouns play in "ensuring their work is maximally persuasive" (Harwood, 2007, p. 45).

Harwood (2005a) found many of the same purposes for first person when he analyzed published articles from four disciplines (Business and Management, Computing Science, Economics, and Physics). Writers used *I* and *we* to help them convey the value of their work, to express opinions, to describe research procedures, to announce the structure of the text, and to establish their relationship with readers. Some of these functions involve greater risk than others. By owning their opinions, for instance, writers risk being criticized if their ideas are later proven wrong, but they also demonstrate they have the authority to make claims.

The expert writers Ken Hyland (2002b) interviewed, as well as the 240 journal articles he analyzed (representing eight disciplines), revealed that many experts use first person pronouns to "promote an impression of confidence and authority" (p. 353). When Hyland compared the journal articles to student papers, he found that experts from across disciplines are "*four times* more likely to explicitly intervene with the first person" (2002a, p. 1098, original emphasis).

The use and prevalence of first person varies across cultures, but in the academic writing of American English, *I* is common, and its prominence is growing, perhaps as an acknowledgment of the role that writers play in creating knowledge (Vassileva, 1998). In a few disciplines, such as mathematics, first person plural is preferred, even in single-authored texts; however, generally speaking, compared to academic writing in other languages, academic writing in English includes many more instances of *I*, a finding confirmed in several cross-cultural studies (e.g., Vassileva, 1998; Mur Dueñas, 2007; Lorés-Sanz, 2011).

Although the prevalence of first person can vary by discipline (Hyland, 2002b; 2001b), within disciplines (Harwood, 2007), and within genres (Martínez, 2005), in general the research indicates that experienced academic writers writing in English use first person pronouns to take credit for forming hypotheses and gathering data, as well as to own their claims and conclusions—in other words, to establish their expertise.

How Students Use First Person

When writers use any first person reference, they assert "the right to have a 'voice'" (Ivanic & Camps, 2001, p. 25). It is no surprise, then, that when novices write to experts they don't assert the kind of authority that experts do. This is especially true for students from cultures that value collective identity. Fan Shen (1989), recounting his experiences as a Chinese student at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, has described the difficulty he had learning to use first person as a Western writer would. In China, tradition dictates that *I* be "somewhat hidden or buried in writings"; emphasizing one's self appears aggressive or "boastful" (p. 460). In Hong Kong, the upper-level undergraduates Hyland (2002a) studied avoided using first person when "it involved making a commitment to an interpretation or claim" (p. 1106). In interviews, many of the students said that they were reluctant to claim personal authority and ownership. Similarly, María José Luzón (2009) found that Spanish engineering students did not use first person pronouns to present themselves as knowledgeable members of the discipline.

Another study indicating that students writing in other cultures are reluctant to use first person to assert authority comes from Ramona Tang and Suganthi John (1999), who analyzed first person pronoun use in 27 essays written by first-year students in Singapore. Least powerful—and most common—were first person plural pronouns identifying the student as belonging to a group (e.g., *As we all know* …). Next on Tang and John's continuum are first person plural pronouns identifying the writer as a "guide" through the essay (e.g., *In this quotation we see an example of …*). A similar identity is the writer as "architect," using first person singular to preview the essay structure (e.g., *In this essay, I will describe* …). Tang and John found this use of first person to be rare (14% of all occurrences). Another identity is "opinion-holder," using first person to introduce an opinion or attitude (e.g., *I think …; I believe* …). In the sample, four of ninety-two first person pronouns (4.5%) served this purpose. The "most powerful role" is when first person pronouns identify the writer as the source of an idea (p. S29). Only five first person pronouns (5.6%) served this purpose in the corpus.

Are undergraduates in U.S. colleges any more inclined than students in other cultures to use first person pronouns in their writing? If so, do they use first person to take credit for their opinions and

interpretations (as experts do) or do they use first person for low-risk functions only? Research addressing these questions is sparse. So, for insights, I analyzed a sample of papers written by students enrolled in courses at a U.S. community college. My findings suggest that, if prompted, these students imitate some of the ways experts use first person to establish their authority, but just as often students use first person to acknowledge their lack of authority. The findings also suggest that asking students to engage in the work of the disciplines is one way to help them imitate expert use of first person.

The Sample

To learn how U.S. undergraduates use first person pronouns in their academic writing, I analyzed 25 papers written for introductory courses at a Washington State community college. I originally asked 26 instructors for a sample of student writing. Seventeen instructors responded. In order to analyze more than one writing sample for each assignment, I eliminated from the corpus assignments for which I received only one student paper. In all, I analyzed two or three student papers from eleven non-composition courses. All papers are high scoring, single-authored papers, written in the Fall of 2010 for 100 or 200-level courses. A list of course titles, along with word counts, appears in Appendix A.

Most of the assignments involve analysis. For example, Chemistry and Microbiology students interpreted experiment results; Abnormal Psychology students diagnosed eating disorders by observing patient symptoms; Geography students interpreted seismograph readings for a volcano; and Statistics students collected and interpreted data about a sample. Another five assignments involved analyzing a primary "text" (a performance, film, or literary work).

Methods

To determine the frequency and distribution of first person pronouns in the corpus, I first searched the 25 papers for occurrences of *I, my, me, we, our*, and *us*. I counted only instances where the pronoun refers to the author of the paper or, in the case of *we*, *our,* and *us*, to a group to which the author belongs. Occurrences of first person pronouns that appear in quotations or do not refer to the writer or to a group to which the writer belongs were deemed irrelevant for my purposes and were not counted.

I next determined the various rhetorical functions *I* serves in the student papers. Those functions include:

- Making a claim (statements of interpretation, judgment, or inference)
- Describing a procedure
- Expressing uncertainty or doubt (i.e., acknowledging the author's limited knowledge, skill, or expertise)
- Expressing self-benefits or personal response to the topic
- Demonstrating understanding to the instructor
- Announcing a topic or purpose
- Addressing the reader

I then re-read the papers and coded each instance of *I* according to its function.

To gain further insights into how students construct their relationship to their audience, I also coded each instance of *we* as being either *inclusive* (referring to the reader and writer as members of the same group) or *exclusive* (referring to a group to which the reader does not belong).

Results and Data Analysis

The sample includes 236 first person pronouns, most of them (112) in the two Biology lab reports. Table 1 indicates the frequency of first person pronouns in the student papers arranged by discipline. The most commonly used pronoun is *I* (124 instances), representing 53% of all first person pronouns in the 25 papers. *We*is the second most common pronoun (37 instances, or 16%), followed closely by *my* (33 instances).

Table 1: Frequency of First Person Pronouns

Discipline	I	my	me	we	our	us	Total # of Pronouns	Percent of Total Words in the Discipline
Microbiology (2 papers)	44	25	4	23	8	8	112	4.7%
Abnormal Psyc (2)	35	5	7	4	0	0	51	2%
Public Speaking (2)	6	0	0	1	6	2	15	1.1%
Drama (3)	10	0	4	5	0	0	19	Less than 1%
Chemistry (3)	9	1	1	1	0	0	12	Less than 1%
Race/Ethnic Relations (2)	9	1	0	0	0	0	10	Less than 1%
Geography (3)	8	0	0	0	0	0	8	Less than 1%
Art History (2)	1	1	1	1	0	0	4	Less than 1%
Music Appreciation (2)	2	0	0	0	0	0	2	Less than 1%
World Literature (2)	0	0	0	1	1	0	2	Less than 1%
Statistics (2)	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	Less than 1%
Total	**124**	**33**	**17**	**37**	**15**	**10**	**236**	

Two factors explain the prevalence of first person in the Biology and Psychology papers. First, both assignments ask students to interpret what they observed—in a lab or a documentary. Second, both assignments ask students to explain how they reached their conclusions. For example, the Biology students are directed to:

> Talk about how YOUR experiments led you to identify your organisms. (original emphasis)

The Chemistry lab report assignment also asks students to interpret and evaluate their results, but the prompt indicates that "all text should be written in **3rd person past tense**" (original emphasis). Still, two of three Chemistry papers include *I* in the discussion/conclusion section, suggesting that when asked to explain how they reached conclusions, students do not hesitate to use first person. In the Geography, Art History, Music Appreciation, and World Literature papers, conversely, first person pronouns are rare. These assignments involve analysis and interpretation; but students drew from *written* sources, not visual data.

In general, when prompted to describe methods, give interpretations, or provide personal response, students used first person pronouns, even when directed not to in the case of the Chemistry students. But when using textual evidence, students seem reluctant to use first person to present their opinions alongside those of published authorities.

Functions of I

Although the meaning of the pronoun *I* might seem unambiguous, it can construct various roles for the writer, as Tang and John (1999) have illustrated. Some instances of *I* diminish rather than enhance the writer's authority. I analyzed students' use of *I* to determine the function of the pronoun in the papers. Sixteen of 25 students (64%) used *I* in their papers, at least one writer in nine of the eleven courses represented in the sample. Forty percent of the occurrences of *I*appear in introductions or conclusions, where low-risk uses of *I* are common (e.g., to announce a topic), rather than in sections of the paper where claims usually are made and argued. None of the four students writing in World Literature or Statistics used the pronoun *I*. Appendix B includes the frequency of *I* in the remaining courses. In all, 124 instances of *I* appear in 16 papers, most of these in Psychology and Biology. Appendix C shows the functions of *I* in rank order within the sample.

The most frequently occurring function (33% of all instances of *I*) is *to state a claim*, *judgment, or interpretation*. More than half of these instances appear in the two Psychology papers. The Psychology students were asked to watch a documentary, diagnose eating disorders in patients, and recommend treatments. Thus, students wrote sentences such as the following:

> *I diagnosed* Brittany with binge/purging Anorexia due to the fact that … (Psychology 3)

Taking credit for an opinion or interpretation is a "high risk" function of *I*, because the writer could be proven incorrect. Hyland (2002a) found this use of first person in only 8 of 64 student reports (13%). However, in my sample, students writing in six different disciplines claimed credit for their interpretations, all of them within assignments that explicitly ask for their opinions or that involve reporting their observations:

> *I think* treatment based on the addiction model will yield the best results. (Psychology 2)

> *I believe* that the water, which is pretty heavy, added to the mass of AgCI greatly. (Chemistry 2)

> *I believe* this production successfully accomplished its goal. (Drama 2)

Instances such as these appear in 12 of 25 student papers (48%).

The second most common function of *I* in the student papers is *to describe research procedures*, a function common in both student and expert writing (Hyland, 2002a; Vassileva, 1998). However, in my corpus, all instances of *I* serving this purpose appear in science lab reports (e.g., "Once *I separated* and found the Gram-positive organism, *I then followed* the flow chart … " [Biology 1]). In assignments that involve reading texts, students did not use first person to describe what they did. This mirrors the findings of Tang and John (1999). Their students were asked to use course documents to analyze a quotation; none used first person pronouns to relate research methods.

In other instances, the students I studied used first person in ways that reveal their novice status. The third most common function of *I* was *to express uncertainty or doubt*. Writers in seven of the eleven courses used first person to admit the limitations of their own knowledge, understanding, or abilities. Expressing uncertainty was most prominent in Biology, Chemistry, and Psychology papers; these assignments asked students to identify potential sources of error or to identify what left them confused. Given prompts like *What are you left wondering about*? (in the Psychology assignment), it is no surprise that students wrote sentences like this:

> At first *I thought* she may be exhibiting signs of borderline personality disorder, due to her self-mutilating behavior and her reaction to Polly's criticism of her, but *I don't know* for sure. (Psychology 3)

The Biology and Chemistry students would have been inclined to express uncertainty for another reason. They conducted experiments designed by their instructors. Unlike experts, who write for a reader who knows less about their research than they do, these students wrote to an audience who knows the "right" answer. In this way, the rhetorical situation found in the science assignments—and in much student writing—is unique. This same degree of uncertainty may not appear in the writing of students who design their own research, a point I'll return to later.

Another common function of first person in student writing—appearing in 10 of 25 papers in the sample (40%)—is *to express a personal response to or personal benefit* of the assignment. Students in seven different courses used first person for this reason. Here is an example from Biology:

> This was a fun lab and *I enjoyed the detective work* involved with figuring out what the organisms were. (Biology 2)

This is a function of first person not mentioned in studies of expert writing; but, again, the difference between student and expert practice is explained by the assignment prompts. As Appendix C shows, most of the first person pronouns appear in papers written for the Microbiology, Psychology, Race and Ethnic Relations, Drama, and Public Speaking assignments, all of which call for personal response (e.g., "What was the most memorable, interesting, or disturbing part of the film?"). Some of the students Hyland (2002a) studied also used first person to express the personal benefits of their research. Most did so for the same reason: professors asked them to reflect on their learning experience. Conversely, in 240 published research articles, Hyland found no instances of *I* used by writers to express personal benefit.

Other functions of first person appear less frequently in the student papers. Three student writers (12%)—representing Psychology and Biology—used first person *to demonstrate understanding of course content*. Rather than simply describing what they did, these students described how they knew what to do (e.g., "*I knew from our class results* that *Kocuria rhizophila* makes a capsule and so I did a simple capsule stain."). This is a move unique to students and no doubt reflects the fact that students write first and foremost for a grade. It is another way their rhetorical situation results in practices that differ from those of experts.

Only three instances of *I* in the corpus are used *to announce the writer's topic or purpose*, all used to identify which topic the student selected from options the instructor provided (e.g., "The film *I selected* [to analyze] was *Driving Miss Daisy*."). The Biology and Chemistry students wrote about an assigned subject, perhaps suggesting to them that announcing the topic was unnecessary; however, in other assignments, students selected from a range of topics, making the infrequency of this low-risk use of first person noteworthy. What's also missing is first person used to forecast the structure of the paper (e.g., *In this essay, I will first describe*). While Harwood (2005b) found that experts commonly use first person to announce the structure of their papers and Hyland (2002a) found this to be the most common use of first person among upper-level students in Hong Kong, no students in my sample used first person for this purpose. The Biology and Chemistry reports had Methods, Results, and Discussion sections, and three other assignment prompts delineated questions, which students answered in order. Students may not see the need for forecasting structure when prompts provide a structure for them. Other assignments, however, such as for Art History and Literature, direct students to narrow their scope and announce their purpose. Even in these papers, students

did not use first person to preview structure. This finding may be related to the level of writer. Tang and John (1999) found that first-year students in Singapore also avoided first person when forecasting essay structure, instead preferring impersonal phrases such as "This essay will show … ." The cultural backgrounds of students in my study are unknown, but they too avoided first person when forecasting the structure of their papers.

First person used *to address the reader* appears only once in the sample, within the conclusion to a Geography paper:

> Mount Adams is one volcanic mountain here in Washington State that *I would recommend* to visit. (Geography 2)

The unequal relationship between student and professor is no doubt why direct address is rare. In addition, students, unlike experts, do not have to engage readers to get (or keep) an audience.

Functions of We

Expert writers often use *we* to establish their authority. A writer might say something to the effect of "We see in this example …" and thus suggest that he is speaking for the discipline or speaking for both himself and the reader. But as math professor Candia Morgan (1996) has noted, even students writing in mathematics, where first person plural is standard, rarely use *we* to refer to both writer and reader. They don't want to risk implying that they consider themselves equal with the instructor or that they are qualified to speak for the instructor.

Within the corpus of 25 papers, *we* appears 37 times, far less often than *I* (appearing 125 times). Nineteen of these instances (51%) are inclusive, meaning *we* refers to both writer and reader, but *we* is not used in a way that suggests the writer considers himself equal with the instructor. Instead, the students (representing six courses) use *we* to refer to all of society or to a "general" audience. Here is a typical example:

> Food is so much a part of our daily lives, that *we often don't give a second thought* to its presence in literary stories. (Literature 1)

Tang and John (1999) regard an instance like this, where *we* identifies the author as a member of society at large, to be one of the least powerful functions of first person. Among the students they studied in Singapore, it was the most common identity created with first person pronouns. Although it could be argued that writers who use such instances of inclusive *we* claim the authority to speak for others, it's a low risk move compared to experts' use of inclusive *we*.

Experts use inclusive *we* to establish their membership within a disciplinary community. The writer asserts herself as qualified to speak on behalf of others in the discipline. By presuming to know what the reader believes or thinks, the writer sees both herself and the reader "as participants with similar understanding and goals" (Hyland, 2001a, p. 558). This is of course a difficult move for students to make, and none of the students in my corpus used *we* to convey membership in a discipline, despite writing about topics they have researched and writing to representatives of the field.

Even more striking is the contrast between novice and expert use of exclusive *we*. In my sample, five instances of exclusive *we* appear in a single review of a play, all referring to the writer and others attending the play (e.g., "Then *we got to meet* the character …" [Drama 3]). Another thirteen instances of exclusive *we*appear in science lab reports. Here is a typical example:

> To minimize the possibility that the silver nitrate would be the limiting reagent, *we used* excess amounts. (Chemistry 1)

In this sentence, *we* refers to the writer and other students conducting an experiment. Although the writer refers to a group to which the reader (instructor) does not belong, the student does not use exclusive *we* in the way an expert would. In expert prose, exclusive *we* typically refers to the writers themselves (Kuo, 1999), as in "We interviewed subjects… ." Here, the authors write from a position of power. They enjoy a "superior" status because they know more about the research they describe than do readers. Students, conversely, often use *we* to denote membership in a group that knows *less* than the reader. When the biology student writes, "*we knew* which organisms were positive or negative," she refers to knowledge obtained from the instructor who designed the experiment and thus knows much more than the writer about the organisms (including what the organisms are). Once again, the students in this sample use first person to defer rather than claim authority.

In two ways—to make claims and explain procedures—13 of 25 students in the sample (52%) imitated the way experts use first person in academic writing.These expert practices were encouraged by assignment prompts that explicitly ask students to describe their methods or give their opinions. But the broader tendency among students, found in 14 papers (56%), was to use first person to express personal benefit, admit limited knowledge, or demonstrate understanding to the instructor.

Discussion and Pedagogical Implications

In this sample of writing from community college students, some of the least powerful uses of first person pronouns are among the most widely used. Unlike expert academic writers, who use first person to take credit for new ideas, these students often used first person to express uncertainty, to describe personal benefits, and to identify themselves as having less status than their audience. Whether or not students writing in U.S. universities use first person in a more authoritative manner is unknown, but this sample suggests there are several reasons community college students and experts differ in their use of first person.

First, some assignments encourage students to acknowledge their novice status. Prompts that ask students to reflect on what confused them, for example, have pedagogical merit but prevent students from using first person the way experts do.

Second, when assignments involve summarizing or analyzing written texts, students seem reluctant to interject themselves into the conversation. The assignments that involved discussing written sources—Geography, Art History, Music Appreciation, Literature, and Statistics—were among those with the fewest first person pronouns. Perhaps students hesitate to put their opinions alongside those of the experts. Or perhaps students associate these types of assignments with the impersonal "school reports" of high school and do not understand that in college they are expected to contribute to the conversation.

Third, even where students are asked to write genres that resemble those used in the discipline (e.g., Biology and Chemistry lab reports), the assignments may not require the kinds of thinking and writing experts actually do. Alaimo et al. (2009) explain, using the example of chemistry:

> Because a [student] lab report typically does not address a genuine question, it does not teach students how scientists find questions, construct hypotheses, design experiments, or make arguments supported by data from the experiment. Overall, while the lab report

> provides a format for students to fill in as homework, it does not help students learn to think like a chemist. (p. 19)

The lab reports in my corpus had distinct Methods, Results, and Discussion sections; but rather than conduct authentic research, students completed an exercise for which the instructor knew the answer. As a result, "because students know (or think they know) the expected outcome of the 'cookbook' experiments, they chalk up any deviation from the expected outcome as 'experimental error' with little thoughtful explanation" (Alaimo et al., p. 20).

Fourth, the asymmetrical relationship between student and teacher further encourages a novice style. Morgan (1996) describes the challenge for the student writing in mathematics, where first person plural is expected. When a student uses first person plural, she:

> constructs a reader who is also a member of the same community and is thus in some sense a colleague… . In academic writing this assumption of mutual membership of the mathematics community is to be expected. In the school context, however, the relationships between writers and reader are more asymmetric. The teacher or textbook may use such conventional forms … but for the student-writer there are tensions between the need to display her familiarity and facility with conventional mathematical language (and hence to have the right to be considered part of that community) and her need to satisfy other classroom demands. (p. 6)

Indeed, the first-year student who "addresses the teacher-reader with authority as a colleague may even be perceived as arrogant" (Morgan, p. 6).

Writing to demonstrate knowledge to the teacher continues to be the norm at all levels of student writing, as Daniel Melzer (2009) demonstrated with his national survey of college writing prompts. As in earlier studies, including studies of secondary school writing by Britton et al. (1975) and Applebee (1984) and studies of college writing by Bridgeman and Carlson (1984) and Eblen (1983), the majority of assignments in Melzer's sample were written for an audience of teacher-as-examiner. In every discipline, the instructor knows more about the subject than students do. In addition, the instructor has the power to grade the work, making this, as Hyland (2002a) notes, "not the best forum to declare an authoritatively independent self" (p. 1109).

How can we help students better approximate expert uses of first person pronouns? One way is to make them aware of how experts use first person. Many students raised in the U.S. attend high schools where first person use is discouraged (Gordon, 2007), and few writing handbooks explain the purposes first person pronouns serve in academic writing. Hyland (2002b) recommends having students analyze the uses of first person in the writing of their majors to determine what kind of an authorial presence is created and how. Having students analyze their own writing is another way to raise their awareness. By coding each instance of first person in their papers according to its function (see, for example, Hyland [2002b] or Tang and John [1999]), students can discover "the kind of *writer role* that these pronoun choices suggest," and determine the "relative authority" they claim as writers (Hyland, 2002b, p. 355, original emphasis). Students can then compare their own "authorial profile" (p. 355) to that of expert writers in their field of study. Such exercises make students aware of the role first person pronouns play in creating a writer's persona.

Another way to promote expert writing practices is to provide opportunities for students to write expert genres. These are necessarily only approximations of the kinds of writing experts do—Carter, Ferzli, and Wiebe (2007) call them "apprenticeship genres" (p. 295)—but writing them changes the way students learn, write, and think about course content. In the sample described here, most first

person pronouns used in expert ways appear where students are asked to write apprenticeship genres (i.e., lab reports with Methods, Results, and Discussion sections). But these students also used first person to identify their lack of knowledge, in part, because they were writing to an audience that knows the "right" answer. If students instead are allowed to engage in genuine inquiry, to design and describe research that they know *more* about than does their audience, they will have greater authority to use first person in the ways experts do. There is no denying the merit of assignments calling for metacognitive reflection, but if we want students to imitate the way experts think and write, they also need opportunities to imitate the work of discipline insiders. Assignments with predetermined questions and answers deprive students of the impetus writer-researchers have when they write.

Even first-year students can conduct original research. In my own first-year composition courses, students conduct textual analysis studies using a corpus of first-year student papers I provide and/or the *Michigan Corpus of Upper-Level Student Papers* (available at http://micusp.elicorpora.info/). Their goal is to learn something about student writing across the curriculum; many choose to contrast the writing of first-year and graduate students. Students have, for example, analyzed the images, forecasting, documentation, selection of sources, quality of paraphrasing, and presentation of source material (i.e., paraphrasing vs. quoting) in student papers. Students design their own studies, usually modeled after one of the studies they discuss in their Literature Review section (studies I help them locate). Original research reports are unlike the expressive writing that students regard as "personal" and unrelated to the "intellectual work" of any discipline (Bergmann & Zepernick, 2007, p. 130; see also Beaufort, 2007). Examples of original research projects appropriate for undergraduates studying in any discipline are easy to find in the journals of the field.

Many features of expert writing appear when students do the kinds of work academics do. I conducted a computer search of 38 IMRAD-style research reports written by my composition students during the past two terms. First person pronoun use was not discussed in class; still, first person pronouns appear in 34 of the student papers (89%), used in ways one would expect in expert research reports. Most students used first person in their statements of purpose (e.g., "I analyzed," "I hypothesized," "I set out to learn") and in their description of methods. Notably, none of the students used first person to identify the limitations of their own knowledge, understanding, or abilities, but many used first person to assert their authority. For example, they used first person to place their research into the context of previous studies:

> With some inspiration from [X], I have formulated a study to answer this research question.
>
> [X] found that students who used framing got a higher score than students who didn't, and after doing my own study I can see how their results make sense.

To identify the value of their research:

> The gap I hope to fill in my research is …
>
> I believe that this is important to talk about because …

To state findings:

> I found that there is more hedging in the graduate student papers, especially in the Biology reports.

> I determined that undergraduate writers tend to use fewer questions in their writings than graduate writers.

To explain findings and to make original claims:

> The reason this number could be so high is because of my small sample size as well as the courses that were analyzed.

> I believe that this [finding] is due to the experience [the graduate students] have … .

Other features of academic writing (e.g., qualifying claims; using disciplinary vocabulary; presenting data in figures and tables) emerge naturally when students describe their own research, or they can be "required" by instructors who assign genres where these features are expected.

Designing and reporting original research has additional benefits for students. In their long-term study of college students, Nancy Sommers and Laura Saltz (2004) found that an important "paradigm shift" occurs among the successful students, a shift "more likely to occur when faculty treat freshmen as apprentice scholars, giving them real intellectual tasks that allow students to bring their interests into a course" (p. 140; see also Alaimo et al., 2009). Students recognize the difference between expert genres and "school genres," and they see greater value and meaning in disciplinary writings, perhaps because they recognize the "authenticity" of the apprenticeship genres (Carter, Ferzli, & Wiebe, 2007, p. 298; also Wardle, 2004). When students describe original research, they are cast in the role of experts instructing the reader on something the reader does *not* know. Further, when students produce rather than report knowledge, they become more aware of the social construction of knowledge, enhancing their ability to critically read research findings.

When Flower and Hayes (1980) used "think-aloud protocols" to determine how expert and novice writers define writing problems and discover ideas, they found that "an audience and exigency can jolt a writer into action, but the force which drives composing is the writer's own set of goals, purposes, or intentions" (p. 27). Flower and Hayes concluded that:

> People only solve the problems they represent to themselves. Our guess is that the poor writers we studied possess verbal and rhetorical skills which they fail to use because of their underdeveloped image of their rhetorical problem. Because they have narrowed a rhetorical act to a paper-writing problem, their representation of the problem doesn't call on abilities they may well have. (p. 30)

Rather than being a "paper-writing problem" (a student task), original research assignments are researcher-writer problems (expert tasks). We may not be able to change the asymmetrical relationship of the student writing for evaluator. But we can allow student writing to have a purpose beyond telling the instructor what he or she already knows. Assignments that involve observation, textual analysis, interviews, small-scale surveys, or other primary research convey to students that "the research-based writing most highly valued in university settings doesn't merely summarize facts from other sources, but uses those other sources as springboards for original research to test previous findings and create new knowledge" (Sutton, 2000, p. 447).

Readers make inferences about writers based on the identity they "construct" for themselves, and first person pronouns play an important role in revealing how writers perceive both themselves and their relationship with readers. Before novices can learn to use first person and other linguistic

features in the ways that experts do, however, they must be given opportunities to do the kind of writing that allows them to approximate those uses.

Appendix A - Papers in the Corpus

Course Title	Number of Texts	Number of Words*
Abnormal Psychology	2	2329
Acting-Beginning	3	2882
Art History	2	3295
General Chemistry	3	2972
Introduction to Statistics	2	587
Microbiology	2	2408
Music Appreciation	2	2452
Physical Geography	3	1363
Public Speaking	2	1327
Race and Ethnic Relations	2	2054
World Literature	2	2218
Total	**25**	

* When determining the length of papers in the sample, only words in running text were counted. Words in titles and headers, captions and content of tables and figures, and references were not counted.

Appendix B - Frequency and Location of I in Student Papers

Course Title	Occurrences of *I* (total number)	Occurrences of *I* in Intro or Conclusion	Number of Words in Paper
Abnormal Psychology 1	21	6	1349
Abnormal Psychology 2	14	11	980
Art History 1	1	0	2003
Art History 2	0	0	1292
Chemistry 1	0	0	912
Chemistry 2	6	6	1092
Chemistry 3	3	3	968
Drama 1	2	0	1137
Drama 2	4	4	479
Drama 3	4	0	1266
Geography 1	0	0	580
Geography 2	8	7	577
Geography 3	0	0	206
Microbiology 1	14	0	976
Microbiology 2	30	1	1432
Music Appreciation 1	2	0	1095
Music Appreciation 2	0	0	1357
Public Speaking 1	1	0	685
Public Speaking 2	5	3	642
Race and Ethnic Relations 1	5	5	902
Race and Ethnic Relations 2	4	4	1152
Total	**124**	**50**	

Appendix C - Rhetorical Functions of I in Student Papers

Function	Art Hist.	Bio.	Chem.	Drama	Geog.	Music	Psych.	Speech	Race/Ethnic	Total
Make a Claim	0	3	2	6	0	0	22	5	3	**41**
Describe Procedure	0	35	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	**36**
Express Uncertainty	1	4	6	1	3	0	5	0	2	**22**
Relate Personally	0	1	0	3	4	2	5	1	2	**18**
Show Understanding	0	1	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	**3**
Introduce Topic	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	2	**3**
Address Reader	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	**1**

References

Alaimo, Peter J., Bean, John C., Langenhan, Joseph M., & Nichols, Larry. (2009). Eliminating lab reports: A rhetorical approach for teaching the scientific paper in sophomore organic chemistry. *The WAC Journal, 20*, 17-32.

Applebee, Arthur N. (1984). *Contexts for learning to write*. Norwood: Ablex.

Beaufort, Anne. (2007). *College writing and beyond: A new framework for university writing instruction.* Logan: Utah State UP.

Bergmann, Linda S., & Zepernick, Janet. (2007). Disciplinarity and transfer: Students' perceptions of learning to write. *WPA: Writing Program Administration, 31*(1-2), 124-149.

Bridgeman, Brent, & Carlson, Sybil. (1984). Survey of academic writing tasks. *Written Communication, 1*(2), 247-80.

Britton, James, et al. (1975). *The development of writing abilities (11-18)*. London: Macmillan Education.

Carter, Michael, Ferzli, Miriam, & Wiebe, Eric N. (2007). Writing to learn by learning to write in the disciplines. *Journal of Business and Technical Communication,21*(3), 278-302.

Eblen, Charlene. (1983). Writing across the curriculum: A survey of a university faculty's views and classroom practices. *Research in the Teaching of English, 17*(4), 343-348.

Flower, Linda, & Hayes, John R. (1980). The cognition of discovery: Defining a rhetorical problem. *College Composition and Communication, 31*(1), 21-32.

Gordon, Karinne W. (2007). Personal voice in academic writing. *Ohio Journal of English Language Arts*, *47*(1), 44-51.

Harwood, Nigel. (2005a). "Nowhere has anyone attempted … In this article I aim to do just that": A corpus-based study of self-promotional *I* and *we* in academic writing across four disciplines. *Journal of Pragmatics*, *37*(8), 1207-1231.

Harwood, Nigel. (2005b). "We do not seem to have a theory … The theory I present here attempts to fill this gap": Inclusive and exclusive pronouns in academic writing. *Applied Linguistics*, *26*(3), 343-375.

Harwood, Nigel. (2007). Political scientists on the functions of personal pronouns in their writing: An interview-based study of "I" and "we." *Text & Talk*, 27(1), 27-54.

Hyland, Ken. (2001a). Bringing in the reader: Addressee features in academic articles. *Written Communication*, *18*(4), 549-574.

Hyland, Ken. (2001b). Humble servants of the discipline? Self-mention in research articles. *English for Specific Purposes*, *20*(3), 207-226.

Hyland, Ken. (2002a). Authority and invisibility: Authorial identity in academic writing. *Journal of Pragmatics*, *34*, 1091-1112.

Hyland, Ken. (2002b). Options of identity in academic writing. *ELT Journal*, *56*(4), 351-358.

Ivanic, Roz, & Camps, David. (2001). I am how I sound: Voice as self-representation in L2 writing. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, *10*, 3-33.

Kuo, Chih-Hua. (1999). The use of personal pronouns: Role relationships in scientific journal articles. *English for Specific Purposes*, *18*(2), 121-138.

Lorés-Sanz, Rosa. (2011). The construction of the author's voice in academic writing: The interplay of cultural and disciplinary factors. *Text & Talk*, *31*(2), 173-193.

Luzón, María José. (2009). The use of *we* in a learner corpus of reports written by EFL engineering students. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes, 8*(3), 192-206.

Martínez, Iliana A. (2005). Native and non-native writers' use of first person pronouns in the different sections of biology research articles in English. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, *14*(3), 174-190.

Melzer, Daniel. (2009). Writing assignments across the curriculum: A national study of college writing. *College Composition and Communication, 61*(2), 240-261.

Morgan, Candia. (1996). "The language of mathematics": Towards a critical analysis of mathematics texts. *For the Learning of Mathematics, 16*(3), 2-10.

Mur Dueñas, Pilar. (2007). "I/We focus on …": A cross-cultural analysis of self-mentions in business management research articles. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, *6*(2), 143-162.

Shen, Fan. (1989). The classroom and the wider culture: Identity as a key to learning English composition. *College Composition and Communication*, *40*(4), 459-466.

Sommers, Nancy, & Saltz, Laura. (2004). The novice as expert: Writing the freshman year. *College Composition and Communication, 56*(1), 124-149.

Sutton, Brian. (2000). Swales's "moves" and the research paper assignment. *TETYC, 27*(4), 446-451.

Tang, Ramona, & John, Suganthi. (1999). The "I" in identity: Exploring writer identity in student academic writing through the first person pronoun. *English for Specific Purposes*, *18*, S23-S39.

Vasquez, J. A., Shamberger, P. J., & Hammer, J. E. (2007). Plutonic xenoliths reveal the timing of magma evolution of Hualalai and Mauna Kea, Hawaii. *Geology*,*35*(8), 695-698.

Vassileva, Irena. (1998). Who am I/who are we in academic writing? A contrastive analysis of authorial presence in English, German, French, Russian and Bulgarian. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics, 8*(2), 163-190.

Wardle, Elizabeth A. (2004). Can cross-disciplinary links help us teach "academic discourse" in FYC? *Across the Disciplines, 2*. Retrieved July 11, 2012, from https://wac.colostate.edu/atd/articles/wardle2004/index.pdf

Contact Information

Teresa Thonney
Department of English
Columbia Basin College
Pasco, WA 99336
Email: tthonney@columbiabasin.edu
Phone: (509) 542-5539

Complete APA Citation

Thonney, Teresa. (2013, March 18). "At first I thought… but I don't know for sure": The Use of First Person Pronouns in the Academic Writing of Novices. *Across the Disciplines, 10*(1). Retrieved from https://wac.colostate.edu/docs/atd/articles/thonney2013.pdf