

“I, WE,” AND IMPERSONAL CONSTRUCTIONS

There is no rule against using the first person in the *Physical Review*. The old taboo has long been deplored by the best authorities and ignored by the best writers. The choice between “I,” “we,” “one,” “the author(s),” the passive voice, etc. should be made on the basis of meaning, emphasis, and taste in each sentence. More specific advice follows:

Passive vs active. The passive is often the most natural way to give prominence to the essential facts. “Air was admitted to the chamber” is readable and sensible; no one cares who turned the valve. But avoid the passive if it makes the syntax inelegant or obscure. Do not write “The values of” and then make the reader hold his breath through five lines of description before the verb “have been calculated”; if you start with “I (We) have calculated” he will get past the first person easily enough.

“I” vs “we.” “We” may be used naturally by two or more authors of a paper in referring to themselves, or by a single author in referring to himself and his associates. A single author should also use “we” in the common construction that politely includes the reader (“We have already seen ...”). But he should not use “we” as a mere substitute for “I” where it clearly means him alone. “In our opinion,” referring to one person, fails badly as an attempt at modesty; either write “my” or resort to a genuinely impersonal construction.

“The author(s).” If you use this as a substitute for “I (we),” make sure you have not mentioned any other authors very recently, or write “the present author(s).”

Abstracts are republished in abstracting journals in the company of abstracts not written by the author of the paper they belong to. It is therefore more normal to pretend you are abstracting someone else’s paper, and use “the author(s)” and passive rather than “I” or “we” in that can be done without sacrificing clarity and brevity.

Acknowledgments. Even those who prefer impersonal language in the main text may well switch to “I” or “we” in the acknowledgments, which after all concern human beings. That also leaves “he” and “they” free to refer unambiguously to the persons thanked.