How to Avoid Second Person

The second person point-of-view is shown by the pronouns “you, your, yours, you all.” It is the bane of English teachers everywhere.

Why do English teachers hate second person so much? Because it doesn’t belong in formal academic writing.

“You” belongs in informal writing, like blog posts and how-to guides. “You” might also be used in special types of fiction, like choose-your-own-adventure novels.

The reason that it doesn’t belong in formal writing, however, is that “you” implies that the writer has an intimate connection with the reader.

And that’s a problem.

Research papers are the most prevalent type of formal writing that exists. But using “you” in a research paper implies that the audience being addressed is sympathetic to the author and, therefore, the people in the audience are inclined to agree with what is written. Second person creates a bias—intentional or not—and that is unacceptable in formal writing.

Luckily, avoiding second person is fairly straightforward, and here are some methods that can be used.

1. Replace the word “you” with “people, person, anyone, someone, those, they, he, she,” etc.

   This is an effective method, but it grows stale quickly. No one wants to read a paper where “you” has obviously been replaced with one of these pronouns.

2. Replace the word “you” with “one.”

   We’ve all heard this in an English class. While “one” effectively eliminates “you,” the word “one” also weakens papers much more than the word “you.” Not only is the word awkward to use but it also eliminates any emotional connection the writer may have with the reader.


   Wait. What? Passive voice? Isn’t that something else English teachers tell students to avoid?

   Well, yes.
But passive voice isn’t always a bad stylistic choice. If a sentence can be made active, make it active. That’s always the best choice. Passive voice, however, becomes useful when the word “you” doesn’t want to be erased. Sometimes second person pronouns are stubborn, clinging to sentences a writer wants them to vacate.

Sentences can be constructed passively with relative ease. Just use helping verbs like the following: be, have, do, can, should, ought to, must, will, may

*Note: Some of those helping verbs are considered modal helping verbs because they express possibility or necessity*

Passive voice can also be constructed by using linking verbs. Generally speaking, “be” is considered a linking verb in all its forms: be, am, are, was, were, being, been, had been, will have been, may have been, should have been, could have been, will be (etc.)

Plenty of other verbs are considered linking verbs. Any verb that does not describe an action is a linking verb; thus, the sentence with a non-action verb is constructed in the passive voice.

This method for replacing “you,” is a strong one. Writers need to be careful not to overuse the passive voice, however, as it has a tendency to weaken the impact of their papers (or stories) when it is overused.

4. Label the person performing the action.

This is a solid method to eradicate “you” from any paper. When a paper is directed to an audience of journalists, for example, use the words “journalist” and “journalists” in place of “you.”

Labeling like this is similar to the passive voice method—writers should be careful not to overuse it.

5. Use infinitive verbs.

The infinitive of a verb is a verb preceded by the preposition “to.”

Examples: to be, to drive, to see, to mark, to learn, to love, to laugh, to play

Using infinitives is a solid method for eliminating second person. Be careful not to overuse it, though, as the infinitive form of any verb is the weakest form of that verb.

6. Change the verb form so that you is no longer required.
Changing the verb form being used is an incredibly strong method of eliminating “you.”

Consider these examples.

“When you drive along the Parkway, you can see a lot of beautiful leaves.”

Versus

“A lot of beautiful leaves can be seen when driving along the Parkway.”

Changing the verb from drive to driving forces the entire sentence into a new arrangement. That new sentence formation also allows the implied you to be used.

“A lot of beautiful leaves can be seen when driving along the Parkway.”

At first glance, this sentence might seem to be grammatically incomplete. It isn’t. The reason is because the word “driving” tells the reader WHO is seeing the leaves. That WHO is the implied you revealed by the gerund form of the verb “to drive,” (which is “driving”).

7. Use a different verb.

Weak verbs lend themselves to second person pronouns much more readily than strong verbs. Weak verbs include the verbs feel, think, seem, look, appear, see, tell, show, among others.

Strong verbs also provide the opportunity for a writer to significantly spice up their work.

Here’s an example of a sentence using a weak verb:

“You see a locked office and decide to enter it.”

Versus:

“The locked office beckons; what secrets lurk within its walls?”

Out of the two sentences, the second one contains a hook.

Strong verbs create tension.

Tension is what keeps readers interested.
Overall

There are multiple methods you can use to avoid that pesky second person “you” in formal writing. The strongest of those methods are using strong verbs, changing verb forms, and using passive voice constructions. The other methods work. They just don’t work as well.

And in informal writing? Use “you” all you want. Well, as long as you are writing blog posts, instructional how-to’s, or choose-your-own-adventure stories.

In fiction? Stay as far away from “you” as you can, except when dialogue forces the usage of second person pronouns.