I am often asked why APA Style prohibits the use of *I* or *we*. I love this question, because the answer is always a pleasant surprise: *I* or *we* is perfectly acceptable in APA Style! In fact, the *Publication Manual* actually recommends using first person, when appropriate, to avoid ambiguity.

What types of ambiguity result when an author goes to great lengths to avoid using *I* or *we*? On pages 69–70, the *Manual* gives three possibilities:

1. Authors sometimes use the third person simply because it sounds more objective. Authors will often use *the authors* as a stand-in for *I* or *we*, but using this phrase can lead to confusion. Consider this sentence:

   As Smith and Jones (1999) and Drew (2007) noted, there is no correlation between television viewing time and calorie intake. The authors replicated this finding with three experiments.

2. Does “the authors” refer to both Smith and Jones (1999) and Drew (2007)? Or does it refer to the authors of the current paper? You would likely guess it’s the latter, but the meaning would be more clear with *we*:

   As Smith and Jones (1999) and Drew (2007) noted, there is no correlation between television viewing time and calorie intake. *We* replicated this finding with three experiments.

3. Attempts to avoid first person can also lead to anthropomorphism. As the *Manual* notes (p. 69), an experiment cannot “attempt to demonstrate,” but *I* or *we* can.

4. Finally, the use of the editorial *we* can sometimes be confusing. For example, “we categorize anxiety disorders …” may leave the reader wondering whether *we* refers to the authors of the current paper, to the research community, or to some other group. But this doesn't mean *we* must be completely avoided. *As the Manual states* (p. 70), “we is an appropriate and useful referent.” You could simply rewrite this sentence, “As psychologists, we categorize anxiety disorders …”

It’s not always right, or always wrong, to use the first person. We all have different writing styles, and the use of first person may come more naturally to some than to others. The most important thing to consider, whether using APA Style or another style, is the clarity and accuracy of each sentence in your text. To quote the *Manual* one more time, “Make certain that every word means exactly what you intend it to mean” (p. 68).

Just one caveat: As always, if you are writing a paper, thesis, or dissertation, your institution may have its own guidelines for the use of first person. The acceptability of first person is sometimes a hot topic, and guidelines vary from one institution to another. Dissertation committees sometimes advise students to follow APA Style with a list of school-specific exceptions, and the acceptability of first person may be one of these. Likewise, if you are submitting a manuscript for publication, you should always check the publisher’s guidelines.