

Avoiding “You” in College Essays

With each strategy, the first quote uses “you,” whereas the second shows how to modify the sentence.

Strategy 1 – Shift to first person “I”: A commonly used strategy that conveys honesty in a personal essay.

“You’ve seen the news reports about people who need assistance after a natural disaster or animals in need. Consider volunteering, which gives you an opportunity to change people’s lives, and your own.”

“I have often seen news reports about people or animals needing assistance after a natural disaster. At these times, volunteering is my opportunity to improve the lives of the less fortunate, and my own.”

Strategy 2 – Shift to first person plural “we”: An inclusive strategy to be used sparingly in personal prose.

“You have to understand what it means to be an American. If you take your rights for granted by ignoring your responsibility to vote, you’re being ungrateful. Should you let your country down?”

“We have to understand what it means to be Americans. If we take our rights for granted by ignoring our responsibility to vote, we’re being ungrateful. Should we let our country down?”

Strategy 3 – Shift to third person “one”: A formal strategy that distances the reader in a technical piece.

“If you don’t understand the meaning of the book, you shouldn’t feel stupid. Books are complex systems with many layers of meaning. You won’t always see everything the author wants you to see.”

“If one does not understand the meaning of the book, one should not feel stupid. Books are complex systems with many layers of meaning. One will not always see everything the author wants one to see.”

Strategy 4 – Shift to third person “he, she, they”: A tricky strategy because it “genders” the subject.

“You enter a bar and someone stops you, offering a drink. Should you accept, or not? It’s something you may have encountered more than once. Either you know what you’re doing, or you don’t.”

“Consider the situation: A woman enters a bar and someone stops her, offering a drink. Should she accept, or not? In this risky, split-second decision, either she knows what she’s doing, or she doesn’t.”

Strategy 5 - Strip away the “you” references completely: A safe strategy that focuses attention on topic.

“You’re right to wonder if schools should have higher standards. If you’ve seen the duplicity, you’re already thinking about it – you simply can’t compare teachers from one subject to another.”

“Schools should have higher standards in hiring. Duplicity, preferential treatment, and prejudice in hiring cause many schools to have great disparities in teacher quality from one subject to another.”