



**Decolonizing the Academy: How to Foster Critical Thinking in College Writing by
Welcoming the Taboo use of First Person, Empowering Female Voices, and
Honoring Intersectionality**

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Abstract

As a college educator, I am increasingly concerned about my students' lack of ability to assert individual critical thinking. There is no shortage of post-secondary writing guides that suggest strategies like avoiding first person. I argue that this is a damaging pedagogy: antithetical to teaching the original critical thinking and attribution that is integral to post-secondary writing; a weak relationship with the use of AI; culturally/socially dangerous - especially for historically marginalized students (e.g. BIPOC, female, and non-binary students). I argue that college educators should work to decolonize the academy and the classroom by engaging with taboo pedagogies: allowing the use of first person to proactively honor student cultural backgrounds, languages, worldviews, and non-binary gender identities as assets to their writing. Through referencing research and personal experience, I assert such radical pedagogy can enable writing students to discover individual voices and original critical contributions to global conversations.

Keywords: Decolonize; Pedagogy; Intersectionality; First Person/"I"

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“I” am Worried

As a college educator, I am actively concerned about my students' lack of ability to assert individual critical thinking. Overwhelmingly, they seem to struggle with cultivating and articulating any original opinion that departs from summary, especially in their writing. I believe this struggle is linked with a common pedagogical practice: the regard for the use of first person (“I”) as taboo. In their various writing projects and activities, as well as informal surveys I conduct with my first and second year college writing courses at the beginning of each semester, students (referencing anonymously for grace of anonymity) inform me that they are being told to “write objectively” for college writing, professional writing, and for life, because “no one cares what you think” (CSN English 101 Student Writing Sample I, p. 3, November 2023). They report that the use of first person is forbidden; they share thoughts like: “From years of practicing only 3rd person writing [...], I learned to push my voice aside [...]” (Anonymous, p. 3, 2023). This is where I find this pedagogy disturbing.

To my mind, teaching young students (not to mention non-traditional writers of any age) not to use the word “I” is dangerous: I argue that it is especially oppressive to female students who may be learning from many other influences of their intersectionality to be silent. It is also oppressive to populations that might be otherwise vulnerable to the historical colonization of the classroom and the academy (Mintz, 2021; Parker *et al.*, 2017).

This paper explores how college educators can empower historically marginalized voices (female voices), and work to decolonize the college classroom dynamic by employing specific (albeit, taboo) pedagogical strategies. I argue that college educators should proactively employ pedagogies that honor student intersectionality (e.g. cultural backgrounds, languages, different worldviews, and non-binary gender identities) as tools in their writing to discover their individual voice, and original critical contributions to global conversations. This could include not enforcing a single set of grammar rules, or a single version of English; welcoming language mixing, slang, colloquialisms; being flexible on traditional writing conventions (e.g. citation, format, syntax, etc.), but it can start through the use of first person. I can't help referencing Decartes (1637) famous “I think, therefore, I am” (Decartes, p. 21). If we take away the “I” for students, how can we ask them to think? Further, does that not then imply that the student ceases to exist at all?

There is no shortage of college writing guides that suggest strategies like avoiding first person; if I were a student doing a quick google search, I might find some quick-access answers from about “First Person Point of View” from Walden University (2024), sbribbr.com (2024), and more. For more academic writing guides for North America or the UK, we can find examples like *Writing for Success* (2011) from my own College of Southern Nevada or *Improving Your Writing* from the University of Aberdeen (2023). While these writing guides might acknowledge some confusion with this antiquated pedagogy, a user still finds instruction to “Generally, avoid writing in the first person, unless instructed to do so. Avoid giving an opinion [...],” or guidance that suggests: “In

most contexts, the use of first person is discouraged in academic writing [...]” (Alexander & Rennie, 2023, p. 33). To be fair, it is likely that well-meaning texts like these (and, in turn, instructors) impart such wisdom to help students to avoid bias (*Writing for Success*, retrieved 2024, Ch. 10.8). However, I believe students can be taught to avoid bias through qualifying language, citing sources (moreover, teaching them about evaluating sources for credibility). Moreover, I believe that using first person as a form of attribution (or another qualifier) can navigate away from bias. To me, instruction that discourages the use of first person is unclear and problematic; I see students who are interpreting whatever instruction they were given (or might discover online) in a way that avoids first person altogether. I argue that this is not only antithetical to original critical thinking and attribution that is integral to post-secondary writing, but culturally and socially dangerous. I feel that teaching college students (or even younger students) not to use first person uniquely oppresses the female voice, and potentially the voices of other marginalized folks.

The Female “I,” AI, and the Apology

In my experience as a writing instructor—nearly a decade—it is overwhelmingly female students who struggle to depart from summary and generate original critical thinking. For example, in most cases, they are able to summarize a text or topic, but they struggle to make a critical contribution of their own - to say what they think, and why. Arguably, this is the root of analysis for most college / university courses: what an individual thinks, and why (*UNLV Writes*, 2020, p. 8; Empire State University. 2024. *Analysis in Research Papers*). If universities and colleges are asking for original critical thought—that is not generated by AI—it may be possible to do this without welcoming the use of first person, but it also might yield awkward writing. As the conversation about integrating AI into the humanities, and the college writing experience (and other disciplines) evolves, there are reservations about whether or not AI is even capable of original thought (Edwards, 2023). Do we have a responsibility, as humans in the academy to preserve and nurture skill sets in generating original thought? Perhaps that is a matter for another paper, but I would submit here that asking students to integrate their own cultural backgrounds, languages, worldviews and experiences into their writing (through the use of first person) could help foster originality, encourage students to use their own thinking and not rely too much on AI, and not to lose critical thought to the human experience forever.

My experience has also demonstrated to me that the students who apologize for their work or participation are overwhelmingly female. Recently, in a single assignment submission for a single class, I had four female students independently apologize to me alongside their submission in the Canvas comments box: in a class of about 20 students, where maybe half identify as female, I think that is significant (Anonymous Sample Comments, 2024). I briefly pause here to share a short anecdote of my own experience as a female undergraduate student, apologizing to a female professor whilst handing in a paper: I begged forgiveness, because it wasn't very good, I'd been in a rush, I'd had a lot of other assignments, I'd had to work, etc. She said (referencing anonymously for grace of anonymity), “Stop. None of my male students ever apologize

when handing in an assignment” (Anonymous UNLV English Professor, January 2004). This is my experience, as a white, native-English speaking, cisgender female - even in my privilege, I felt the need to diminish my original critical contribution - my voice. Where had I learned that? I will say that I, too, had been taught not to use first person in my college writing. I will proceed to acknowledge some actual scholarship on this: work that finds how things like gender norms, or cultural/racial identity, or language backgrounds influence students in various ways; I will further suggest that the complex intersectionality between these things (learned gender power structures and norms, cultural identities and language identities) may be influencing the way students communicate - the way they assert themselves, or don't.

Specifically, there are many possible ways for a female college student to receive the message that she should be quiet; for example, some scholarship suggests learned gender norms have an influence: Cathleen Greenwood's article “The Quiet Girls” (1997), and work from Marie Homes (2023) and Aparna Sagaram (2023) on the behavior of youth and people-pleasing suggest that learned gender power structures and cultural norms result in female students being less assertive in their classroom(s) and in their writing. This work suggests that: in many ways, female students have been taught not to use their voice (Greenwood, 1997; Homes & Sagaram, 2023). Gloria Anzaldúa's “How to Tame a Wild Tongue”, from her larger work *Borderlands*, explores girls overcoming learned silence, or the “tradition of silence” in her Chicana cultural background: “well-bred girls don't answer back” (Anzaldúa, 2020. p. 34). She also describes being punished in school for speaking Spanish (Anzaldúa, 2020. p. 34). Arguably, this is an example of the colonization of the classroom that carries, throughout generations, into pedagogies practiced in the academy of higher education.

Colonizing College Writing; Discouraging Cultural “I”dentities

I argue that passively following established “rules” for writing when a student is engaging at the college / university level is a dynamic that aligns with classroom colonization: Patricia S. Parker *et al* have produced work that examines the college/ university as a colonized space in “Decolonizing the classroom: Creating and Sustaining Revolutionary Spaces Inside the Academy” (2017):

The colonial and class-based legacy of academic knowledge production and dissemination has meant that in embodied terms, academic knowledge producers in the Social Sciences and Humanities have historically been wealthy men of European origin [...] (Parker *et al.*, 2017, p. 234). [...] when students of colour, women, or people from the Global South go to graduate school and begin the path of writing back and decolonising knowledge production, that implicit otherness is often reinscribed upon their bodies and used to discount their lived experience, their words, and their research. (Parker *et al.*, 2017, p. 234)

The takeaway that I want to highlight here is that the learned practice of “pushing your voice aside” as my student put it, lives on with college writers, according to Parker -

beyond their university writing experience, through to their professional and personal writing experiences. They still feel discounted and dismissed (Parker, *et al.*, 2017, p. 234). I think it is fair to argue that refusing college / university writers the agency to use first person could perpetuate this kind of cultural dismissal - the discounting of individuals.

If the practice of feeling discounted, or not being allowed to use "I," lives on in students, we can interpret it as its own kind of trauma. Deana Simmons addresses other kinds of micro-traumas that might engender imposter syndrome in female students of color - for example, being publicly corrected for pronouncing the word "ask" as "axe" (Simmons, 2015). This is the kind of colonizing dismissal of culture or individual identity that Parker acknowledges. Referring again to Anzaldúa's work - she further argues that "[a]ttacks on one's form of expression with the intent to censor are a violation of the First Amendment [the right to free speech]" (2020, p. 34). I argue that: to dismiss cultural practices, other Englishes, alternative pronunciations of a language in our college/ university classrooms, and in our students' writing is to be complicit with the colonization of the academy. Moreover, it may very well be a violation of government-sanctioned rights and freedoms.

Indeed, student race, cultural background, or worldview may also contribute to whether or not a student asserts their voice, or uses first person. For example, students coming from collectivist cultures (as distinguished from individualistic cultures) may not be enthused about asserting their individual thinking (Homes & Sagaram, 2023). Scholarship from the American Educational Research Journal suggests that such influencing factors are further compounded if we consider populations like undocumented immigrant students, working as un-seen or imperceptible for fear of deportation (Mangual Figueroa, 2017). If the academy then teaches these student populations not to offer original individual thinking, not to use first person, then it could be dismissing entire intersectional webs of cultural backgrounds, racial identities, and worldviews. Then, instructors in the academy could be unwittingly silencing student voices, and complying with the colonization of the classroom. I will briefly share another personal anecdote: as an American (Las Vegas native) student studying in London, I had multiple professors (referencing anonymously for grace of anonymity) who would circle bits of writing in my papers, and ask "Is this a Las Vegas term?" simply because it was a different version of English (Anonymous King's College, London English Professor, October 2008). Incidentally (and contrary to what I had been taught), the same professor asked me why I didn't simply use first person in my writing (Anonymous Prof, 2008). I believe this professor was aiming to be helpful and supportive. And they were - I learned a lot! But, they were also shutting out my cultural background and my worldview. As a writing instructor, I try not to do this to my students. Again, if I am coming from a place of white, native-English-speaking, cisgender privilege, and I have felt and experienced this learned silence, I wonder: what is it like for BIPOC students, or non-binary BIPOC students?

Non-Binary / Intersectional "I" identities; Healing Trauma through "I"

What about a non-binary interpretation of "female" - those choosing to identify as female? Some scholarship suggests that many trans students are working under fears similar to what we just described about undocumented students - punitive outcomes resulting from using their voice and being outed (Wilmer, *et al.*, 2008)? What if many of these cultural or social identities happen to intersect for a student (or students): gender, race, etc. For example, BIPOC women, or trans-women are influenced by gender norms and also cultural norms. It may be so that those individuals have learned to navigate college writing, and the world, without ever using their voice.

If we think about pedagogical practices that encourage silence (practices that might shut out cultural identities or perpetuate silence as a learned gender norm) as traumas, I think we also have to acknowledge actual violent trauma. There is recent scholarship to suggest that student trauma, whether individual or shared (like mass-shootings or the global Covid-19 pandemic) influences the college teaching classroom dynamic and student writing (Clinnin, Kaitlin, 2020). I must acknowledge here that I wrote this bit prior to the recent December 2023 shooting on the University of Nevada, Las Vegas Campus. I would argue that it is all the more relevant now. Dr. Kaitlin Clinnin writes about the influence of the mass shooting that occurred on the Las Vegas strip on the instructors and students of the University of Nevada, Las Vegas in 2017. She writes about instructors not knowing what to do in response to the tragedy (Clinnin, 2020, p. 129). By extension, I think we can wonder what happens (in particular) to the female voice in college student writing following trauma(s). I happened to be one of those instructors on that campus in 2017. I also happened to have a female student (referencing anonymously for grace of anonymity) approach me to apologize, because she hadn't turned in her assignment - she was in attendance at the concert where the shooting had taken place (Anonymous UNLV English 101 student, October 2017). While I communicated to the student (and to all of my students) that if they wanted to be excused from that particular week's assignment, they could, I also encouraged them to engage in a journal exercise that included prompt suggestions like: "How do you feel?"; "What do you think?"; "Are you okay?" - to use first person. My instinct was to give that young woman her power back - to do what I could (in my capacity as a college educator) to give all of my students their power back. I still make this part of my mission - whatever the course - to give my students power by first allowing them to use "I" - in all writing, including formal academic writing. Following the shooting this past December on UNLV's campus, in addition to reflective writing assignments, one of the assignments I am offering to my students is a formal academic research paper on a topic that is relevant to their communities, their cultural backgrounds, their worldviews. Many students are writing about gun laws and gun violence (again, a topic for another paper); many are writing in first person.

Conclusion: How to Decolonize "I"

As college educators, we need to combat the learned silence that may come with gender norms, the pressure to assimilate to white-dominant cultures, and actual violent traumas. Instead, college educators should be practicing pedagogies that welcome the

intersectionality of cultural backgrounds, language, identities, and non-binary gender identities. We should be crafting assignments that showcase this intersectionality at the forefront, or crafting assignments centered around this intersectionality - as a bedrock, upon which students can build their writing and an original contribution to global conversations. We can regard this work as the decolonization of the academy: not enforcing a single set of grammar rules, or a single version of English; welcoming language mixing, slang, colloquialisms; being flexible on traditional writing conventions (e.g. citation, format, syntax, etc); and, not discouraging the use of first person.

- First person can serve as attribution, and signal phrasing, or a version of citation.
- First person can help with clarity in student writing (understanding what they are borrowing, as opposed to what is coming from their brain).
- First person can serve as metacommentary and qualifying language.
- Finally, first person can help students find their unique voice, and original contributions to global conversations, as opposed to plagiarizing or relaying on AI.

Some scholarship regards personal narrative as a good starting exercise for this kind of decolonization work (Mangual Figueroa, 2017). I would argue even further that in more “formal academic writing” (where we are meant to be enforcing traditional conventions like citation, subject-verb agreement, and avoiding first person), we should - instead - be encouraging students to use their intersectional identities - and first person. bell hooks famously dispensed with colonizing writing conventions: doing away with capitalization, the use of footnotes, etc. (hooks, 1986; Valdivia, 2002). We can continue to empower students by further radicalizing and decolonizing writing conventions - especially female students.

I draw attention to this pedagogy, because I have seen it in recent action. I have sat in with well-meaning, hard-working, underpaid colleagues that think they’re doing the right thing by helping students to adhere to a certain type of English, and discouraging the first person. These instructors are (unwittingly) setting up barriers to student success; they are perpetuating the colonization of the classroom and silencing student voices. It is not my job to be a gatekeeper to student success.

To conclude, I will share the transformative power of these pedagogical strategies, by sharing how it can - in particular - empower female voices. In a final writing assignment, one of my students recently wrote:

One of the most profound shifts I've experienced in this course revolves around the liberation of my voice as a writer. In the confines of high school, the stricture against using the first person "I" in essays seemed like a death sentence. The fear of veering into personal opinion stifled my ability to authentically engage with topics, hindering the depth and passion in my writing. However, stepping into this course felt like shedding a weight that had long constrained my expression. Here, I found

the space to[...] assert my opinions backed by well-reasoned arguments.
(Student Writing Sample I and II, November 2023).

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