

Using Personal Experience in Academic Arguments: A Guide for Freshman Composition Students

Overview

Personal experiences and observations can strengthen your academic essays by providing evidence, building credibility, and connecting concepts to real situations. However, in formal academic writing, it's important to present these experiences without overusing personal pronouns (I, me, my, you, your) or sounding too casual. This handout provides techniques to help you incorporate personal observations while maintaining an academic tone.

Effective Techniques

1. Use third-person perspective with attribution

Instead of: "I observed students struggling with online learning during the pandemic."

Better: "Observations of college students during the 2023 academic year revealed significant challenges with online learning platforms."

2. Focus on the observation rather than the observer

Instead of: "When I tutored students, I noticed they often misunderstood thesis statements."

Better: "Tutoring sessions with composition students showed a pattern of misunderstanding regarding thesis construction."

3. Convert personal experiences into examples

Instead of: "In my experience, group work helps students understand diverse perspectives."

Better: "A classroom exercise involving group analysis of texts demonstrated how collaborative work exposes students to diverse perspectives."

4. Use collective pronouns (we, our, us)

Keep in mind that while I allow you to occasionally use the collective pronouns, we/us/our, some instructors will not. So, as you write in the future, pay attention to their guidelines and rules.

Instead of: "I constantly check my phone for notifications even when I'm with friends."

Better: "Our society has developed habits of constantly checking devices for notifications, even during in-person social gatherings."

5. Reference "society" or "communities"

Instead of: "I've noticed people are losing the ability to have deep conversations because of texting."

Better: "Modern society increasingly replaces meaningful conversations with short text messages, weakening our ability to communicate deeply with one another."

6. Use "individuals" or "people" as reference points

Instead of: "When you scroll through social media, you often compare yourself to others."

Better: "People scrolling through carefully selected social media posts often compare themselves to others, leading to common feelings of not measuring up."

7. Appeal to common observation

Instead of: "I see everyone at the coffee shop working on their laptops instead of talking."

Better: "A look around any coffee shop shows how once-social spaces have changed, with customers focused on their screens rather than talking with those around them."

8. Replace "I think/believe" with evidence-based language

Instead of: "I think that reading assignment deadlines affect student comprehension."

Better: "Evidence suggests that the timing of reading assignment deadlines significantly impacts student comprehension levels."

Sample Transformations

Example 1: Social Media and Attention Spans

Original (Personal): "I've found that my concentration has gotten worse since I started using social media. When I try to read a book, I can't focus for more than a few minutes before I want to check my phone. My attention span is definitely shorter now."

Revised (Academic): "Our ability to concentrate has weakened as social media has become more popular. When trying to read books, many find their focus broken by the urge to check their phones. Society's attention span has grown shorter as websites and apps are designed for quick interactions."

Example 2: Smart Home Privacy Concerns

Original (Personal): "You don't realize how much data you're giving away when you use smart home devices. I was shocked when I learned my smart speaker was recording conversations even when I didn't activate it."

Revised (Academic): "Most people don't fully understand how much personal information they share through smart home devices. The discovery that voice-activated speakers often record conversations without being directly activated raises important questions about privacy in our connected homes."

Example 3: Online Advertising

Original (Personal): "I hate how ads follow me around online after I search for something once. It feels like I'm being watched all the time, and it makes me uncomfortable when I'm trying to enjoy content."

Revised (Academic): "The way targeted ads appear across websites after a single search creates a feeling that users are being constantly watched. This digital tracking reduces our enjoyment of online content and brings up serious concerns about privacy boundaries in today's internet use."

Example 4: AI Writing Tools

Original (Personal): "When I use AI writing tools, I worry that I'm not developing my own voice and might become dependent on them."

Revised (Academic): "As students and professionals begin using AI writing tools more often, valid concerns arise about developing authentic writing styles and becoming too reliant on technology. Finding the right balance between using these helpful tools while maintaining our own thinking skills requires careful thought."

Tips for Success

1. **Use first-person sparingly:** Save "I" for occasional strategic moments, like briefly in introductions or conclusions.
2. **Maintain formal language:** Even when describing observations, use appropriate academic vocabulary.
3. **Balance personal examples with research:** Support personal observations with scholarly sources when possible.
4. **Read your work aloud:** Listen for too many personal pronouns or overly casual language.
5. **Focus on the broader significance:** Connect your observations to wider patterns or implications rather than just your personal reaction.

Remember, personal experiences can make your writing more engaging and persuasive when presented appropriately. The goal isn't to remove yourself completely from your writing, but to frame your observations in a way that fits academic dialect expectations.