



The following guidelines address the use of the second person pronoun “you” in writing. While “you” is acceptable in some instances, such as personal letters and narratives, generally “you” is not permitted in academic papers. As always, check with your instructor about use of “you.”



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Revised Spring 2008

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*Use of the
Second Person
“you”*



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Mini-Lesson # 10

“You” is appropriate when the writer directly addresses the reader. This is true of process or instructional essays, in which the writer gives step-by-step directions to the reader.

Example:

- **Explaining how to write an essay.**

Write a good title for **your** paper. A sharp title, perhaps supplemented by a subtitle, informs **your** reader and helps keep **you** on track as **you** write. (Marius, Richard. *A Short Guide to Writing about History*. New York: Harper Collins, 1995)



A writer may address a reader directly to personalize the writing. Such a technique is good for persuading readers.

Example:

- **Persuading readers to vote in an election.**

As a parent, **your** vote is critical to passing the proposed school tax levy on the November ballot. **You** have a personal stake in this levy -- a child in the system who will directly benefit from the funds **you** help generate by **your** vote for this levy.

However, directly addressing your readers includes them in beliefs which they may or may not actually share:

When **you** listen to that CD, **you** have to wonder why it doesn't get more airplay.

In the above example, you're making assumptions about your reader's taste and personal opinions. If your assumptions are incorrect, you risk alienating your reader.

The indefinite and imprecise “you” is the most troublesome because it is too vague and informal for academic writing. However, simply substituting “one” for “you” does not make it sound any better. Compare the following sentences:

On a busy day, **you** can drive around campus for hours, looking for a place to park.

On a busy day, **one** can drive around campus for hours, looking for a place to park.

Both sound odd to the reader. An easy way solve this problem is to simply define who "you" or "one" is:

On a busy day, **students** can drive around campus for hours, looking for a place to park.

