

That Awkward *One*

“One” keeps it formal when “you” feels too casual.

The pronoun *one* is common in academic writing. When used correctly, it helps your writing sound clear, precise, and appropriately formal.

However, using *one* too often can make your writing feel impersonal or awkward to read. This Scrib.bit shows you how to use *one* confidently and when to choose alternative structures that keep your writing natural and fluent, without losing an academic tone.

Let's look at the three main reasons writers use *one* in academic texts.

1. Generalization (removing the reader)

One allows writers to make statements that apply broadly, rather than addressing the reader directly. This is particularly useful in analytical and theoretical contexts, where claims are intended to be general rather than personal.

- Weaker: *You can see that social norms influence behaviour.*
- Stronger: *One can observe that social norms influence behaviour.*

In this example, *one* replaces *you*, which is informal and reader-directed, with a neutral pronoun that is more appropriate for academic writing.

2. Signalling evidence-based argumentation (removing the author)

Academic writing often prioritizes reasoning and evidence over the writer's personal voice. Using *one* allows claims to be presented as reasoned conclusions, rather than as personal assertions made by the author.

- Weaker: *In this study, we argued that media exposure influences political attitudes.*
- Stronger: *From the evidence, one may argue that media exposure influences political attitudes.*

This construction shifts attention away from the authors and towards the argument itself. It signals analytical caution and frames the claim as evidence-based rather than opinion-based.

3. Signalling context-bound argumentation

One can be used to signal that a claim is interpretive and dependent on its argumentative context, rather than presented as a settled or universally accepted fact. This is particularly useful when introducing or developing a position within an ongoing scholarly debate.

- Without *one*: *Language both reflects and shapes social reality.*
- With *one*: *One may argue that language both reflects and shapes social reality.*

The first sentence presents the claim as axiomatic (self-evident). The second signals that it is a reasoned position, supported by argument and open to evaluation rather than stated as an unquestioned fact.

Using *one* introduces analytical caution and places a claim within an academic argument. This is most effective in the early or middle stages of an essay, where ideas are being developed and tested, rather than in conclusions or when summarizing widely accepted findings.

At a Glance

When *one* is the subject of a sentence, it is always singular. This affects verb agreement and pronoun reference.

- Correct: *One is expected to provide evidence for each claim.*
- Incorrect: *One are expected to provide evidence for each claim.*

Pronouns referring back to *one* must also be singular:

- *One's* for possessive: *One must justify one's assumptions clearly.*
- *Oneself* for reflexive: *One should remind oneself of the study's limitations.*

While grammatically correct, this construction can sound archaic if overused.

Common error (often flagged by markers)

Mixing *one* with plural pronouns such as *they* or *their*.

- Incorrect: *One should support their claims with evidence.*
- Correct: *One should support one's claims with evidence.*

Use *one* sparingly

While *one* is useful, excessive or careless use can make writing vague or impersonal. Always check that the reference is clear and that the sentence remains easy to read.

Problematic: *One may find that one's assumptions are challenged.*

The repetition of *one* here sounds awkward.

Improved: *It is possible to find that one's assumptions are challenged.*

Alternatives and variations: How to replace *one*

Depending on the context, alternative structures often produce smoother, more natural academic phrasing:

Passive constructions: *It is argued that...* instead of *One argues that...*

Impersonal structures: *It can be observed that...*

Nominalization: *The analysis demonstrates...*

Use these options strategically to avoid monotony while maintaining a formal, academic tone.

Disciplinary variation

Although *one* is not forbidden in any discipline, it tends to be used more sparingly in the sciences, where writing often focuses on established findings and empirical evidence.

In the humanities, by contrast, arguments are frequently interpretive and debate-driven. In this context, *one* is particularly useful: it helps writers frame contested ideas carefully, signal analytical caution, and situate claims within ongoing scholarly discussion.