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# The Self and Individualism: An Analysis on the Current Regulations of Academic Writing

## Cover Page Footnote

I thank Professor Paul Viafranco for his assistance in this research. For this work would not have been able to be made without his vital instruction throughout the process.

The Self and Individualism: An Analysis on the Current Regulations of Academic Writing

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### **Abstract**

Individualism, the focus or emphasis on the self, is a highly discussed and debated topic in writing. This is mostly regarding how the self should be addressed and utilized in writing, although there is also debate about what the self truly is, and how one can represent it in their work, veering into more abstract thought and theorizing.

The amount of individualism, or the “self” that one is able to, or should, imprint onto one’s writing varies widely across numerous genres of academic writing, or even writing in general. For example, in much of scientific writing there’s a broad disapproval on the usage of the self: First-person pronouns are preferred to be left out, and writing in active tense is frowned upon. This is often argued to be for the sake of having an appearance of objectivity in work, which science should supposedly always be. Yet in other, more social sciences such as sociology or political science, there is an increased usage of these individualism. Usages of “I” and active tense can be observed. It can be argued that this is natural for these subjects as they are discussing both the self and culture, which is evidently much more difficult, if not impossible to separate from the one conducting the study.

Regardless, this is but a small example of the variance in the usage of the self in writing. Throughout this paper I will analyze the concept of the self in writing, as well as the validity of the current regulations of individualism in academic writing and the benefits of more varied regulations regarding the subject matter.

## **Significance**

The idea of the self is already a nebulous concept, but the usage of it in writing, and how that's received by others is arguably more so. Various cultures have very different ideas of individualism in academic contexts. Some may think of it as the norm, encouraged. While others may see it as improper, or even selfish.

However, even in similar cultures, the opinion of the self in different genres of writing still varies among genres. Why is this? What makes things like usage of the first person, active tense, or imprinting the self into one's writing to be uncouth in certain genres? And where did these regulations originate? Additionally, how these regulations and opinions differ among various cultures are important to consider. I believe answering these questions and assembling all the relevant info in a single document will do writers a great help, as well as widen the academic view of both researcher and reader alike to the true diversity of writing.

## **Literature Review**

Situating the self in writing is seemingly a balancing act. While writers may want to integrate their self-identity into the writing they're creating, often one must limit themselves as not to become "spendthrift" with individualism (Mousley, 1990) as this is often seen as unprofessional, and to the detriment of the validity of the piece. But I'm not sure this is always correct. There is much value to be gained from the individual in academic experience, and much of the repulse towards it is largely arbitrary.

While believed to be for the overall benefit of the work. It has been argued that current Western academic writing regulations actually do very little for the overall quality and impact of writing. (Hyland, 2003) These argued arbitrary regulations which instill value in the more superficial aspects, value less the actual message or quality of the writing and more how it's

presented. Eloquence and verbose lingo are common in much academic writing, and often seen as markings of a well-written piece (Mousley, 1990). Considering this line of thought it's possible to see these regulations more of a barrier than class, race, or otherwise. People who write more from the heart than from the mind via the usage of individualism, as well as the usage of more culture specific viewpoints, are often left out of the academic discussion, and are only able to be considered if they are able to "play the game." (Richardson, 1995) Additionally, while these Western regulations are argued to be simply the unobjective norm, it is being increasingly argued that these are merely the result of an institutional preference for one mode of writing, a creation of a prototypical form of language use all should measure themselves to. (Matsuda 2001) There is simply too much variance in language for such an ideal mode of writing to exist. And the effort of many writers to fully detach themselves from their own writing is both contradictory and impossible. (Mousley, 1990)

However, even as the current zeitgeist shifts in its opinion of individualism, the way in which this encouragement is implemented often flawed and still very western centric.

While implementation of the self in one's writing is certainly useful, many writers who do not have such a solid, internal, western idea of "self" are often lost when told to "Write what you think." Despite the need to parade itself as purely objective, Martin's 1995 study (As cited by Wu 1998) shows the dominant form of academic writing in the West is observed to be argumentative in some form, which is inarguably opinionated in manner.

Authors who, culturally, come from more collectivist cultures which put value on systems, cooperation and harmony, such as Chinese culture (Wu, 1998) may find the individualist writing as brash, unnecessary, and difficult to emulate:

Western rhetoric is like cheddar cheese, a generous gift for Americans, which Chinese consider disgusting and inedible, not fit for consumption." -Caroline

Matalene, 1985 (as cited by Wu)

Shen, (1989) writes his experience of trying to input an idea that was absent in his Chinese upbringing, and describes the continued process of imprinting his self in his writing as a “prolonged, uphill battle”.

On the other hand, Matsuda (2001) states that even in these “collectivist” cultures, an idea of self can be created in writing, but is just too complex and untranslatable into western academic writing:

Being ‘myself’ did not seem to me to mean representing the ‘self’ that I construct when I talk to my English-speaking friends or the one I construct when I am with my teachers. Did it mean my Japanese self – how I generally see myself when I am in Japan?” “I felt that my Japanese self, if such a thing existed, would be beyond my teachers’ comprehension...it would be too complex for me to reconstruct in a 5-page essay.

Using the example of Japanese culture from Matsuda, there are many linguistic and cultural aspects, such as the cultural implications of using certain scripts or honorifics that just cannot be brought over, and as such the cultural self cannot be truly represented in this individualistic manner. To build upon the food simile, while Western identity rhetoric may be like cheddar cheese, Matsuda’s idea of the self is like a rich, umami tasting stew: dense, multifaceted, and unable to be translated into Western terminology.

It is important to then realize that using the self in writing and using individualism are not the same. (Matsuda, 2001) They are two writing techniques that can be used, often but not always in conjunction with each other.

To further the troubles faced with creating a concrete self, there are simply identities who have not been able to create a consistent cultural or self identity due to historical treatment. Historically, African-Americans have atrociously been denied of this. It was once thought that we did not even have the capability to be self-aware at all. And numerous events such as the

slave trade and Apartheid, for South-Africans especially, have severed many from their cultural identities and heritage. (Mbembe & Rendall, 2002) Modern African-Americans have a more group-based writing identity, putting emphasis on themes of community and brotherhood. (Richardson, 1995) This lack of concrete self can be said for victims of any long-standing historical discrimination, such as Jewish peoples (Mbembe and Rendall, 2002) via continued persecution, most notably the Holocaust and for Ukrainians, as victims of the Holodomor, and even the current war and invasion of Ukraine. (Zasiekina et al, 2021)

To give a more institutional and philosophical angle, many, but especially minorities, are facing a large loss of solid personal identities due to systematic discrimination and oppressive economic systems, forcing all into prototypical molds without room for variance or alternate viewpoints and separating themselves from themselves. (Marx, 1844) This is another, much broader and widespread example of needing to “play the game” to succeed. (Mbembe & Rendall 2002; Matsuda, 2001)

Events and systems such as these create intense depersonalization of a people and are yet another example of how forcing Western ideas of individualism is not always possible.

Overall, many of the current regulations in academic writing can be felt as oppressive to the writer wishing to imprint themselves onto their writing. As to many, this is seen as uncouth and immature. Yet in contrast, some of the current pushes for using the self end up enforcing a very Western-centric form of individualism, which can sometimes be just as oppressive for writers who don’t operate in that cultural framework.

### **Research Methods**

*“How is the literary image of the self and the usage of individualism perceived across different genres of writing throughout various cultures? Why?”*



In order to answer this research question and gain a better understanding of the public's opinion on current academic writing regulations, research was conducted through two main avenues, focusing on two academic audiences: fellow undergraduate students and professors.

For the student angle, a small survey was conducted on a group of undergrads with an array of majors related to various academic fields ranging from what would consider "hard" sciences (Mathematics, computer science, Biology) to social sciences, to a few arts majors. The short survey consisted of questions related to how much of the "self" they are encouraged to use in their field's writing. Questions asked students what kind of writing they currently do in their field, and to rate from 1-5 how encouraged they were to use self in said writing. This was then followed by a question asking whether or not they agreed with that level, or whether it should be changed somewhat. The survey ends with an open-ended question asking to explain their answer to the previous question, why they agree/disagree with their field's current writing regulations.

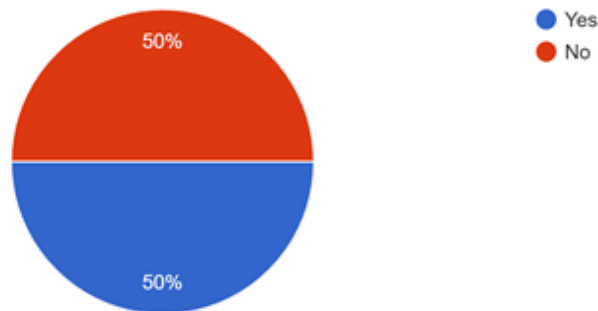
The professor angle was researched through holding an interview with Dr. Christina Guenther of the World Languages and Culture department at Bowling Green State University. The questions were composed of similar subject matter but had a focus on the concept of individualism in writing, as well as the impacts that cultural identity has on writing.

## **Results**

Somewhat expectedly, students in STEM fields reported little to no usage of the self was encouraged in their writing, which consisted mostly of reports, and research papers. The one exception to this was one Science Education major who tallied higher at 4.

When asked whether or not these regulations of individuality in writing was warranted, there was a perfect 50/50 split on Yes and No:

5. Do you think these regulations are always warranted or correct to use in this genre of writing?



When the students were asked why they thought these regulations were or weren't correct. Many STEM students touted that the opinion that focus on the individual would be improper as the point of the science should be the research itself not the individual, as well as the fact that increased self-emphasis could imply bias:

Ideally, the person could be entirely removed from the project, it should be entirely impartial.

-Zachary David Goodman, Computer Science Major

However even with this stance, many agreed that some change should happen within the zeitgeist, and that some self-emphasis is warranted within their fields:

While I know it is considered less professional to write in 3rd, I find that the sense of connection one can add to a piece helps younger minds process it on a more personal and possessive level.

I think it should be allowed to write in a personal setting, given that it can allow educators to use and create a more personal setting for works and teaching materials.

-Michael James Koperski, Science Education Major

One student, a biology major from the University of Arizona who finds himself primarily writing "Medical Documents, Patient Forms, and Clinical Visit Notes," presented that

increased self-usage shouldn't be used in his field, not because it's unprofessional or improper, but because all scientific research is inherently a group effort:

You are mostly doing jobs in that field that require individual performance but at the same time since one would be in the medical field, you would have multiple hands surrounded by you making your job more easy. Most of the time medical work has a team effort performance.

-Dwight Turner III, Biology Major

The arts majors aimed much higher on the self-usage scale. The studied included a Media Production major, who writes mainly film analysis papers, and an Arts major, who focuses on script writing, who both wrote 4 and 5 respectively on the scale.

Because it is my own artwork and I need to be able to explain my thinking process and the creative ways I came to that conclusion.

-Marian Getz, Media Production Major

As for the interview. Dr. Guenther, who writes articles, publications, presentations and the occasional book editing, had this to say about the concept of Individualism:

*I think that that [Individualism] is a myth for the most part, I think that we do well when we share our work and have the opportunity to hear feedback and enter dialogue with others. Even if you do not attend conferences and just sit in your office building and write your work, you are still of course impacted by that which is around you. The articles, the research that's been done in the field; you are in dialogue with others who have written.*

*I think it is important to ask for help as well as giving help, it's a give a take. I'm not someone who subscribes to individualism or originality, we're just standing on other people's shoulders moving forward.*

Regarding whether or not Guenther believed cultural identity affected academic writing, a resounding yes was given. Guenther brings up the importance of the concept of Positionality.

Positionality means we come from a specific space. I'm a white, European, Japanese-born, American-Canadian person. I think I carry a lot with me as an academic as I choose the topics I wish to talk about.

Positionality is important, we come from a specific position. There's no such thing as an objective or neutral way of approaching anything, we always bring ourselves along. Sometimes we are self-critical of that, sometimes we are more aware of that than other times. The way we see the world absolutely has something to do with it [writing].

Where do you get your [me, the interviewer] questions from; your research? They don't come out of a vacuum, they have to come out of a context.

### Discussion

While this was admittedly a short study with a small sample size, I do still feel the results of this survey provide a very interesting look into the “everyman” opinion on academic writing in relation to the self, with the Guenther interview providing that same info from a higher academic level.

While it was expected that STEM majors experienced significantly lesser encouragement of self-usage in writing, it's also notable that many also entered “No” on the question regarding whether they thought the regulations were correct. There is change wanted in the current zeitgeist. While many students are aware that it is seen as unprofessional or selfish, usage of the self is being seen as more and more desired in research, within reason, however.

From the information given, I would say Guenther, Catalene (1985), and Turner would be in agreement on their opinions of Individualism. While all acknowledged the importance of the self in writing, all brought up the contradiction of true Individualism: that being that no academic work or research is ever truly produced entirely by individual. Everything is a “team effort” as Turner says. Everything is supported by others. I'd also relate this to the Mousley (1998) opinion that both Individualism and complete objectivity are impossible goals and contradictions. We cannot separate ourselves from ourselves, and we cannot separate ourselves from others. While perhaps they would not use as harsh wording as Catalene, I believe they also would consider the

cheddar cheese simile of Individualism, viewing it as not academically fit for usage in writing.

This opinion further highlights the difference between self-usage in writing and Individualism. In addition to the fact that Individualism is a very Western concept that many do not or cannot bring themselves to follow in their own academic writing. (Wu 1998; Mbembe & Rendall 2002; Zasiakina et al 2021)

While all “bring themselves along” in academic writing, the opinion seems to be in both literature and public opinion that there is always cooperation and group work needed in research.

Overall, all participants in the study showed a desire for more self-emphasis in their fields academic writing, while still acknowledging the danger of too much self-emphasis; of Individualism, in writing.

I believe all of which falls into an observable trend, which is the increased desire for change within the writing zeitgeist. While total Individualism isn't valued much, self is. And many would like to have their writing valued without needing to entirely subscribe to current academic writing standards, which as discussed, often comes across as arbitrary and horribly biased towards a specific type Western academic. I believe it would be correct for this and similar studies will continue to advocate in this direction, which acknowledges the true variance of writing and the heterogeneity of language. (Matsuda, 2001) This would put more value and appreciation on content rather than presentation, and how closely said presentation measures to others.

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