



Writer's Camp



Anthropomorphism in Academic Writing

Roger D. Carpenter, PhD, RN, NE-BC, CNE

Writer's Camp Counselor

Hospitals trust Tylenol. No they don't!

This article is going to talk to you about anthropomorphism. It's going to tell you what anthropomorphism is, why you should avoid using it, and alternatives to using it in your writing.

But hold on! Actually, it's not.

The article is not going to talk to you about anything. I, Roger, the author, am going to talk to you about anthropomorphism. An article cannot speak—it is not human. The human author is the one who communicates ideas, explains concepts, and guides the reader. This distinction forms the foundation of anthropomorphism in academic writing.

What Is Anthropomorphism?

Anthropomorphism is the tendency to attribute human characteristics, behaviors, or intentions to nonhuman entities such as data, research findings, or objects.¹ In academic writing, examples include statements such as “The literature shows,” “The study found,” or “This article will describe.” The problem is simple: literature, studies, and articles are not human and cannot independently show, find, or describe anything.

Instead, these phrases mask the author's role. It is the author's interpretation of the literature, the author's analysis of the study, or the author's purpose for writing the article that is being communicated.

Academic writing aims to advance knowledge through clear, objective communication. Authors inform, persuade, describe, analyze, and contribute to scholarly conversations. Key qualities include clarity, parsimony, and objectivity—all of which depend on accurately conveying who is doing the thinking and reasoning in the text.

Literal Versus Figurative Language

Anthropomorphic phrasing introduces figurative elements that can conflict with the goals of scholarly communication. Literal language means exactly what it says. Figurative language uses imaginative devices—like personification—to create impact. While figurative language has value in creative writing, it can misrepresent reality in academic contexts by obscuring author agency.

Author agency refers to the author's ability to make decisions, interpret findings, and communicate meaning. Anthropomorphism weakens author agency by attributing these intellectual acts to nonhuman subjects. This shift can make arguments sound less rigorous, overly simplified, or less credible.

Examples include:

- “The study’s aim was to...”
- “The data concluded that...”
- “The chapter’s purpose was to...”

In all of these cases, the action belongs to the author, not the study, data, or chapter.

Guidance from Style Manuals

Major academic style guides recognize anthropomorphism as a potential problem and encourage authors to maintain clarity about human agency.

APA Style

The American Psychological Association (APA)² advises writers to avoid anthropomorphism but permits familiar, widely understood phrases like “the data suggest” because their meaning is clear within disciplinary norms.

AMA Style

The American Medical Association (AMA) Manual of Style³ cautions against giving human actions, emotions, or intentions to nonhuman entities such as studies, tables, or data. AMA discourages formulations like “The study argues...” or “The table demonstrates...” and recommends placing the action on the researchers (e.g., “In this study, we found...”) or using neutral, descriptive verbs (e.g., “Table 2 presents...” or “The findings indicate...”).

MLA and Chicago

The Modern Language Association (MLA)⁴ does not explicitly regulate anthropomorphism, leaving the matter to author choice. The Chicago Manual of Style⁵ offers no direct prohibitions but emphasizes clarity and precision, implying that anthropomorphic construction should be used purposefully and sparingly.

Together, these guides share a common theme: authors—not objects—do the intellectual work.

What About Personal Pronouns?

Some writers avoid personal pronouns (“I,” “we”) because they believe first-person voice is too informal for scholarly writing. However, most contemporary style manuals—including APA, AMA, and Chicago—agree that first-person pronouns are appropriate and often preferable when they improve clarity.

Purposeful use of “I” or “we” strengthens author agency by making it clear who is interpreting the data, drawing conclusions, or taking action. For example:

- “I reviewed the literature and found...”

- “We argue that these findings support...”

These constructions are more precise than anthropomorphic alternatives such as “The literature shows...” or “This chapter argues...”.

While authors should avoid overusing personal pronouns, selective use enhances transparency and reduces ambiguity. Those who prefer not to use first-person voice can employ passive constructions or neutral verbs—carefully—while keeping author agency intact.

Examples

Below is a quick reference to help writers identify anthropomorphic phrasing and revise it for clarity:

Anthropomorphic Phrase (Avoid)	Preferred Alternative (Use)
The study shows...	The authors found that... / The findings indicate...
The data concluded...	Analysis of the data suggests...
The literature demonstrates...	The author identified in the literature that...
The intervention caused...	A change was observed after the intervention...
The chapter will discuss...	In this chapter, I will discuss...

These alternatives ensure that human agency remains visible, and that the writing reflects the true source of analysis and interpretation.

Conclusion

Anthropomorphism may be harmless in casual speech, but in academic writing it can hinder clarity, accuracy, and author agency. By eliminating anthropomorphic phrasing and making deliberate choices about personal pronouns and verb constructions, authors communicate more precisely and credibly. Strong scholarly writing depends on words that convey exactly what happened, who did it, and how it contributes to knowledge. Avoiding anthropomorphism ensures the author—and the scholarship—remain at the center of the work.

References

1. Ruppert TM. The study made me do it: anthropomorphism in research reports. *Western Journal of Nursing Research*. 2024;46(9):639.
2. American Psychological Association. *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*. 7th ed. American Psychological Association; 2020.
3. American Medical Association. *AMA Manual of Style: A Guide for Authors and Editors*. 11th ed. Oxford University Press; 2020.
4. Modern Language Association of America. *MLA Handbook*. 9th ed. Modern Language Association of America; 2021.
5. University of Chicago Press. *The Chicago Manual of Style*. 17th ed. University of Chicago Press; 2017.

Author: Roger Carpenter

Reviewed and Edited by: Leslie Nicoll and Jenny Chicca

Copyright © 2025 Writer’s Camp and Roger Carpenter

Citation: Carpenter R. Anthropomorphism in academic writing. *The Writer’s Camp Journal*, 2025; 1(3):13. Doi: