



**ENGINEERING
PROGRAM IN TECHNICAL
COMMUNICATION**
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Avoiding Text Selfies

Or “the diary mode”

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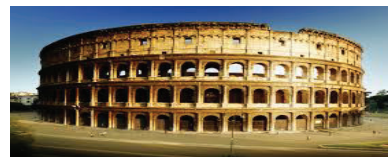
a.k.a “the diary mode”

A common phenomenon in student technical writing is the text selfie, also known as “the diary mode.” Text selfies occur when the writer places herself as the subject of most of the sentences, even though she is describing a technical topic. Instead of making the topic the subject of most sentences, the writer has made herself the topic by place herself (I), or if a team, we, as the subject.

Text selfies shift the focus from the topic to the writer(s) because then she (or they) is the subject of most sentences.

Students lapse into text selfies because they want to write in the active voice.

The sample below shows an example of a text selfie. The subjects of each sentence are highlighted in red, with the third sentence having two more uses of “we” in the predicate.



A “text selfie” is analogous to a photograph selfie, where the photographer is the focus.

In our analysis, **we** neglected the effects of the sting and the surroundings on our boiling curves. To determine if their contributions were actually negligible, **we** integrated the calculated heat flux over time and multiplied this by the sphere’s surface area to obtain the total heat absorbed by the sphere. **We** then compared this value to the heat used to vaporize the liquid nitrogen heights we measured before and after we submerged the spheres in the Dewar. Assuming a heat of vaporization of 199kJ/kg, a liquid nitrogen density of 806 kg/m³, and approximating the Dewar as a cylindrical container with a diameter of 114mm, **we** calculated the energy used to vaporize the liquid nitrogen. If the effect of the sting and surroundings were negligible, **we** would expect the energy used to vaporize the liquid nitrogen to equal the total heat absorbed by the metal spheres. (source: student report, ME 495)

In the sample above, all of the sentences are in active voice and each sentence begins with a familiar subject, but the focus of the passage is on the authors as they made themselves the subject of each sentence.

The following two pages show revised samples of the same content that shift the focus of the text to the topic instead of to the writers.

The first revision uses passive voice, while two others use active voice.

The revised sample below uses the passive voice to remove the text selfie. Note that writers should ensure that the subjects of sentences contain old or familiar information to the reader to achieve good cohesion (flow). Passive subjects and verbs are highlighted in red.

Our analysis neglected the effects of the sting and the surroundings on our boiling curves. To determine if their contributions were actually negligible, **the calculated heat flux was integrated** over time and **the result multiplied by the sphere's surface** area to obtain the total heat absorbed by the sphere. **This value was then compared** to the heat used to vaporize the liquid nitrogen heights measured before and after the spheres were submerged in the Dewar. **The energy used to vaporize the liquid nitrogen was then calculated**, assuming a heat of vaporization of 199kJ/kg, a liquid nitrogen density of 806 kg/m³ and approximating the Dewar as a cylindrical container with a diameter of 114mm. If the effect of the sting and surroundings were negligible, the energy used to vaporize the liquid nitrogen should equal the total heat absorbed by the metal spheres.

The revision below relies on the active voice while keeping old or familiar information in the subjects. Subjects and active verbs are highlighted in green.

Our analysis neglected the effects of the sting and the surroundings on our boiling curves. **Confirming whether these effects were indeed negligible meant integrating** the calculated heat flux over time and multiplying the result by the sphere's surface area to obtain the total heat absorbed by the sphere. **The next step compared** the total heat used to vaporize the liquid nitrogen by using the liquid nitrogen heights measured before and after the spheres were submerged in the Dewar. **The final step involved** calculating the energy used to vaporize the liquid nitrogen, assuming a heat of vaporization of 199kJ/kg, a liquid nitrogen density of 806kg/m³, and approximating the Dewar as a cylindrical container with a diameter of 114mm. **The energy used to vaporize the liquid nitrogen should equal** the total heat absorbed by the spheres.

The revision below keeps the active voice but reformats the typography to highlight three active verbs. Subjects and active verbs are highlighted in green.

Our analysis neglected the effects of the sting and the surroundings on our boiling curves. **Confirming whether these effects were indeed negligible involved** three steps:

1. **integrating** the calculated heat flux over time and multiplying the result by the sphere's surface area to obtain the total heat absorbed by the sphere.
2. **comparing** the total heat used to vaporize the liquid nitrogen by using the liquid nitrogen heights measured before and after the spheres were submerged in the Dewar.
3. **calculating** the energy used to vaporize the liquid nitrogen, assuming a heat of vaporization of 199kJ/kg, a liquid nitrogen density of 806kg/m³, and approximating the Dewar as a cylindrical container with a diameter of 114mm.

The energy used to vaporize the liquid nitrogen should equal the total heat absorbed by the spheres.

These final two revisions removed the text selfies, kept the active voice, relied on familiar information in the subject for good cohesion, and kept the focus on the topic instead of on the writers.