



Guidelines for using 1st person in writing a person centered plan

The Learning Community for Person Centered Practices
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Introduction

When writing a person centered plan, using first person should be approached cautiously. There is a persistent belief that writing the plan in first person somehow “makes” the plan person centered. Plans that are written in first person do read more powerfully but the person developing the plan needs to understand the responsibility that they have taken on. There are three circumstances when using first person makes sense and a general rule about not using first person. They are:

1. Use first person when the person wrote the plan (or section of the plan) or when you are quoting the person whose plan it is and you are comfortable the person meant what they said.
2. Use first person when the person actively edited the plan with the plan writer and clearly approved and understood what was said and how it was said.
3. Use first person when the person primarily communicates with his or her behavior (and not with words) only if -
 - The people who know and care about the person are absolutely sure that what is written is what the person would say;
 - The plan writer is comfortable that these are people who are close enough to the person and spend enough time with the person to truly know; and
 - What is written will be tested (and changed) by on-going listening to the person’s behavior
4. Whenever there is any doubt use 3rd person.

In a bit more detail.

When the person wrote it or you are quoting the person

The greatest caution here is that many people have been quoted in plans who were simply agreeing with a leading question. These are often questions that start with “Don’t you like.... (your roommate, your day service, your staff, etc.). People who have been disempowered are often easy to lead. It may be blatant or it may be subtle but those who write plans have a responsibility to insure that what people are quoted as saying represents our best effort to understand what is important to them.

A quote that reflects a person’s real beliefs is much more likely to occur where that person is an active participant in the development of the plan. Since anyone who can be quoted is able to take an active role in the development of her or his plan he or she should be supported in doing so. Where ever possible the people with whom we are planning should be supported and encouraged to write their own plans.

Those who review plans should look at the context of any quote and see if it is a likely reflection of what is important to the person. Some statements are simply not something any person is likely to have actually said (e.g. “I must be restrained”; “I must follow my behavior program”). Some statements don’t make sense within the context of the entire plan. This includes goal statements. If a goal is in first person then you would expect that things related to that goal would be present in earlier part of the plan, especially under what is important to the person.

The person actively edited the plan with the plan writer

Many of us have had the pleasure having the person with whom we are planning work with us as we synthesize the information gathered into a plan. The plan that results is more powerful and effective. The caution again is the need to be careful that the plan writer doesn’t inadvertently lead the person whose plan it is. As the plan is written and the writer suggests language, the ego of the writer needs to be set aside. One of the ways to test if the statements are OK to be in first person is to suggest alternative language that will change the meaning and see what the person’s reaction is. Unless you are comfortable that the person understands and is actively participating in the editing then you should use third person. For the plan reviewer, read through the entire plan and see if what is written creates a coherent picture of a complex person. Keep in mind that people often have conflicting desires and good plans will reflect them (e.g. “I want to eat unlimited chocolate and be skinny”).

The person communicates primarily with behavior

The greatest caution needs to be used when the person communicates primarily with behavior. Regardless of how the person participated, all initial plans should be regarded as being composed of a set of educated guesses and plans developed with people who do not communicate with words are even greater guesses. Initial plans done with people who do not communicate with words should almost always be done in third person. As the plan is used, each of the statements can be tested by observing behavior. As these guesses are confirmed it is safer to say them in first person. However, the observing and learning must be done by people who have a personal relationship, a personal connection with the person. These are the people who will pay attention to what is important to the person as well as what is important for the person. For those who review plans, look at whether or not this is an initial plan, look at who contributed to the plan, and read it to see if there is a consistent and coherent picture of the person.

When in doubt, use third person

This is the easiest rule. Anytime there is uncertainty use third person. Anytime you are describing what other people should know or do to support the person use third person unless the person has literally written or dictated that section her or himself. Anytime you are writing an outcome for the person it should be in third person unless it meets the earlier rules.