

“In my opinion, ...”

written by Holly

March 2, 2003

By Holly Lisle

It's one of those little linguistic tics, both in speech and in writing, that is so pervasive it's almost invisible.

In my opinion ...

Three words, sometimes modified by various adjectives, that pretend to be something they are not, and attempt to do something that they should not succeed in doing.

I don't like the words. I don't use them. Here's why.

Each of us, no matter what we're discussing, no matter our level up expertise on the subject at hand, offers our opinion each time we present our own words. When we're quoting, we're offering someone else's opinion, or facts that support our opinion – but when we fall back on original words, it's all opinion.

The world is round. My opinion. It's based on compelling photos of the planet from space, the shape of the other planets as visible through our home telescope, the shadow of the earth as it falls across the moon, and such trivia as the fact that airline timetables would be significantly different if it were not. So I have an informed opinion on the subject. But mine is certainly not the only opinion on planetary shape out there. Ask a member of the Flat Earth Society, and you'll get a completely different opinion.

The scientific method is a useful methodology for ordering and organizing information on the world around us. My opinion. I like the scientific method because it works for me, because I am the sort of person who questions everything and takes very little on trust, because I like knowing **why** and **how**, and

because I question the value of unquestioning belief. One of the other opinions on the subject is that the scientific method undermines faith. Which it probably does. Both of these opinions will have differing worth in different circles.

For any issue you care to offer, there are six billion or so separate opinions, based on everything from the latest issue of **Scientific American** to chicken entrails in a dirt circle. And that's fine. Each of us filters the world through our own senses, however flawed those might be (I have lousy eyesight and an exquisitely accurate sense of touch and spatial relationships, for example), and these senses make the information we receive subjective, and our brains and our backgrounds and our educations shove that already subjective information through a series of filters that change it and label it and define it even further.

There is no such thing as an objective observer, because we live inside the system, we are an inextricable part of the system, and the simple act of observing the system changes it – and spotting and defining the changes our observation has caused from inside the system that has just changed is as futile as trying to nail water to a wall. Human beings may strive for objectivity, but it is the impossible goal.

So.

If you say it, it's your opinion.

Fine. Then what is the purpose of the redundant statement "In my opinion?"

"In my opinion" pretends to limit the value of the opinion presented; to make the statement it modifies less threatening by emphasizing it's uncertainty. That's what it pretends to do. But that isn't what it does.

In its simplest form, what it does is attempt to deflect debate from the person making the statement. Kind of the adult

version of the kid's 'ollie-ollie-in-free' zone. "In my opinion" says "This is what I think, but because I have labeled it opinion instead of presenting it as fact, you don't need to argue with me."

The phrase comes in other variations, too. "In my humble opinion" says "I know so much about this that I am merely humoring you by responding." It is anything but humble.

"In my not-so-humble opinion" is less objectionable. It at least tries to be funny, and by acknowledging the presence of arrogance, diffuses it. It's still a discussion-deferral method, though.

"In my studied opinion," means "I have done research on this, sucker, and unless you have done equivalent or better research, shut up because I don't want to hear what you have to say."

And "It's just my opinion, but ..." means "I haven't done any research on this, and I want to tell you what I think, but I don't want you to tell me that I'm wrong."

I don't use any of these, I don't like them, I find them irritating. If someone says something, I already know it's his opinion.

There are other words that work better, that have a legitimate use in the language, and that facilitate discussion rather than blocking it.

"I think" is good. It tells the people who hear or read us that this is an issue we have considered based on some study of information, facts, experience, and so on. "I believe" tells our audience that we are basing our response on personal faith. This is useful to know if only so that we don't put a great deal of effort into our argument – arguing against belief is pretty futile. "I feel" ... ugh. I detest that one. I read it and what I hear the speaker saying is, "I have decided

that my limbic and endocrine systems are more effective for making decisions than my finely-developed brain, and I have therefore reverted to a primitive, non-thinking state.” I see a statement prefaced by “I feel” and I cringe. But at least I know where I stand with the person who said it. So even that approach has some value.

Whereas “in my opinion” is the most useless clause in the English language.

But **[irony]**that’s just my opinion, of course**[/irony]**.

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