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# PREFERENCES FOR NARRATIVE PRONOUNS IN TEXTS ON ENGLISH LITERATURE AND COMPOSITION

Kevin Klein

While personal and impersonal object pronouns-*I*, *we*, *you*, and *one*-aren't the words that directly convey a paper's argument, they do help determine an author's rhetorical stance by establishing tone. Readers can sense critical writing as colloquial or formal, condescending or collaborative, all by how these few short words appear in the paper.

I became interested in how these narrative pronouns contribute to the tone of critical writing when I tutored the papers of freshman students in a philosophy-based honors literature course a couple years ago. Either because of the apparent formality of the subject's discourse or because of the students' high-school training, most didn't even dare suggest that anyone had read or would be reading their papers. They coyly or perhaps ignorantly clung to passive verb constructions, and they put together sentences using the impersonal one with dehumanizing frequency. First of all, I told the students it was okay to use *I* and *we*. These pronouns connect readers to a personable narrator and elicit reader participation in the paper's development. I also told them not to use *one* as a narrative pronoun because, as I imagined, nobody in English writing uses it anymore. I decided to check with writing-style manuals and English professors to be sure I had given the students accurate advice. What I found surprised me: none of my sources offered any definite conventions for narrative

pronoun use. The grammar books merely gave examples of how to use each pronoun, and the professors I talked to generally felt that any of the narrative pronouns works fine, as long as it doesn't detract from the subject matter. After examining various English literature- and composition-related writings to verify what I learned from the professors and manuals, I realized that the authors use narrative pronouns strictly according to their rhetorical purposes instead of following established rules like those for contractions and sentence-ending prepositions.

## NO RULES IN WRITING MANUALS

My first proof of the lack of conventions for narrative pronoun use came as I searched through writing manuals for such rules. Diana Hacker's manual *Rules for Writers: A Brief Handbook* (1996) shows how to make pronouns and antecedents agree, but it gives no examples of when to use each pronoun (pp. 424-5). Similarly, Muriel Harris's *Prentice-Hall Reference Guide to Grammar and Usage* (1997) doesn't prescribe contextually appropriate personal- pronoun use (p. 90).

However, I did find some handbooks willing to take a stand. James McCrimmon's *Writing with a Purpose* (1967) argues that the pronoun *one* produces a highly formal tone. McCrimmon gives the following guidelines on using one as an impersonal subject pronoun:

In a very formal style the impersonal pronoun is sometimes used throughout. Ex: 'Under such conditions one laments one's utter incapacity to be of any genuine service.' When the antecedent is an impersonal one, the third person pronoun is generally used, unless the style is very formal. Ex: 'One must watch his step with that girl' (p. 421).

Another handbook that suggests style in narrative pronouns is *The Scott, Foresman Handbook for Writers* (Hairston & Ruszkiewicz 1996). This manual states that students get confused about the kind of tone to adopt for their papers because some of their teachers don't allow them to use the pronouns *I* or *we*. Consequently, these students will adopt the anonymous, more academic-sounding passive voice and the subject pronoun *one* (p. 362). However, the manual claims that "most writers today recognize that using *I* is both natural and sensible even in relatively formal work" (p. 363), and it gives guidelines for using the first-, second-, and impersonal third-person pronouns in writing. First, the handbook prescribes: "use *one* when you want to express a thought that might be yours, but which should be understood more generally" (p. 364). And it gives an example of *one* in the following sentence: "One cannot know what his or her future holds" (p. 364). While the handbook admits the awkwardness of the possessive "his or her," it doesn't present the option of saying *one's*, which McCrimmon reserves for very formal papers in *Writing with a Purpose*. Next, the manual says to use *you* when giving instructions or directions or when the passage's purpose is to address the readers directly and personally (p. 363). Finally, the

manual warns: "avoid *we* or *us* as a chummy way of addressing your reader" (p. 364). The guidelines from *Writing with a Purpose* and *The Scott, Foresman Handbook for Writers* reveal little new or specific information about style and tone, but the fact that they come from only two out of the seven writing manuals I researched shows that perhaps the authors of the other five manuals considered the rules too implicit or undefinable to include in their explanations.

### PROFESSORS' PREFERENCES

I found the range of opinions among English professors regarding narrative pronouns slightly greater than those expressed in the writing manuals. I interviewed professors of Renaissance literature, poetry writing, critical writing, honors freshman composition, and the director of Brigham Young University's (BYU) Writing Across the Discipline program. Originally, I went to these professors with the expectation that they would differ on which pronouns they preferred, but agree that *one* had become obsolete. However, in my interviews with the professors I discovered that while each did prefer different pronouns, they all believed each pronoun under question, including *one*, could be used effectively in English-related writing.

Despite their wide range of specialties, almost all the professors agree that *one* should be used precisely and sparingly. Gideon Burton, professor of English Renaissance literature, admits that he prefers other pronouns to *one*, but he has no objection to students using *one* if it's the best way they can say what they mean (personal communication, October 20, 1997). Similarly, poetry professor Lance Larsen believes that *one* is okay as long as it's the appropriate pronoun in a specific

situation. He uses as an example the title of a Galway Kinnel collection of poems, *When One Has Lived a Long Time Alone*, explaining that he tried but could not think of a more accurate way to phrase the title. However, Larsen also believes that *one* tends to elevate a beginning writer's diction.

For example, novice writers almost always follow *one* with pompous modals like *must* and *may*, or with the never-contracted *cannot*. It's much more common to read *one cannot* than *one can't* (personal communication, October 21, 1997). Also, novice authors sometimes use *one* for its scientific-sounding authority.

English-writing instructor Beth Hedengren remarks that "a red flag goes up" if she reads *one* in a critical paper because she feels the author will try to pass off academic jargon for authoritative proof (personal communication, October 27, 1997).

Opposite from *one* on the formality spectrum is *you*. Whereas *one* can make an author sound falsely analytical and detached, *you* often exposes an author's attempt to herd unwilling readers into his camp. Kip Clark, a teacher of introductory intensive-writing courses at BYU, remarks that the use of *you* may make fallibly universal assumptions about readers (personal communication, October 29, 1997). And Deirdre Paulsen, former Director of BYU's Writing Across the Disciplines program, feels that *you* can be overly prescriptive, as well as redundant (personal communication, October 28, 1997). That is, new writers often try to force the reactions of their readers to fit the state of persuasion they attempt to establish. And its redundancy follows the same flaw as with *I*: just as the author doesn't need to identify herself with "I think" or "I believe," the audience doesn't

have to be addressed as *you* to know who it is.

As with *you*, many professors dislike *we* in English papers because it forces them into agreement with the author. Paulsen comments, "The pronoun *we* bothers me because I don't like to be told what I think." Larsen agrees, stating that the pronoun *we* assumes the reader is part of the writer's thinking base. However, Burton prefers *we* to the other pronouns discussed. Clark also prefers *we* to any other pronoun, but he counsels students to be aware of the tone their professors prefer and to choose their pronouns accordingly. And regarding the first-person singular pronoun, none of the professors held strong or even variant opinions regarding *I*. They all agree that it's fine to write "I think" or "I believe" in research papers (and obviously in personal essays or thought papers), as long as authors don't overuse these phrases.

Overall, these interviews prove that several professors of similar subjects at the same university differ in the styles of writing they prefer. More importantly, the interviews demonstrate the importance of narrative pronouns in how these professors formulate their opinions of writing style and acceptable tone.

### ACADEMIC WRITERS AND THEIR PREFERENCES IN PRINT

The above professors' pronoun preferences do not reflect exactly current conventions in English writing. To get a broad sampling of English-related texts, I studied essays in journals, essay collections, and anthologies. I have quoted the sentences that contain exemplary pronouns completely in order to show the rhetorical context to which each pronoun contributes, but I've reserved my analysis for the section following these

examples. The writing samples most frequently contain the pronoun *we*, followed by *I*, *you*, and *one*.

The pronoun *we* appears in many writing contexts. Shakespearean scholar Herschel Baker writes with *we* in his essays on the historical plays in *The Riverside Shakespeare*. Baker ends his essay on *Henry V* (1974) with the following sentence: "Significantly, two of them [Nym, Bardolph and Pistol] are hanged and the other slinks away, but in the din of Henry's triumph we hardly hear them go" (p. 934). Also, two of the four essays in the December 1996 issue of *College English* exhibit the pronoun *we*. First, Kurt Spellmeyer establishes a communal tone in his introduction by writing, "Although we tend to see ourselves as working in the era after theory . . . We are, perhaps, *trapped* in theory" (p. 893). And similarly, Kristie S. Fleckenstein begins her essay in the same issue of *College English* with the sentence, "Consider for a moment the metaphors that permeate our theoretical thinking about the nature of being" (p. 914).

Writers also frequently employ the first-person singular pronoun. Both Spellmeyer and Fleckenstein invoke *I* in the same essays I've used to exemplify *we*. In *The Critical Experience*, (1994) a collection of essays about literary theories, English Professor David Cowles opens his discussion of Formalism with these lines: "Let me begin with excuses. I'm going to be reductive here" (p. 7). In another essay in the same book, Bruce Young states, "I would argue that all who read, and certainly all who write about literature, are in a sense moral and philosophical critics" (p. 36). Lastly, *The St. Martin's Guide to Writing* (1995) contains an essay by Elisabeth McPherson that is a textbook example of

using the first-person- singular pronoun. The essay, titled "Where Were We, Where Are We, as Community College English Teachers," begins, "It may be presumptuous of me to talk about both the past and present of two-year college English. I know a good deal more about where we were than where we are" (p. 422).

*You* finds its way mostly into instructional writing like that of *The St. Martin's Guide*. The chapter on how to teach sentences and paragraphs contains the sentence, "If you have previously taught Christensen's sentence theory, that is a natural place to start" (p. 253). Also, Young's article about Moral and Philosophical Criticism relies on *you*: "Why, then, has it been out of favor during much of the twentieth century? You may find the beginnings of an answer if you think about your first encounters with moral criticism" (p. 23).

While I believed all along that *one* had died out from English writing, I actually found examples of it in different places. First, Marilyn L. Williamson uses it in her article "Review: Shakespeare Studies: Gender, Materialism, and the Cultural Other" in *College English* of December 1996. She writes, "This is not to say that one cannot detect change in *Shakespeare and Gender*; for example, if one knows the feminist critique of Shakespeare" (p. 958). And Gail Houston's essay on Psychoanalytic Criticism in *The Critical Experience* contains the following: "One might interpret William Faulkner's 'A Rose for Emily' as an example of the return of the repressed" (p. 140).

## RHETORICAL SITUATION DETERMINES PRONOUN CHOICE

From my analysis of when and which narrative pronouns occur in various fields of English-related writing, I have discovered that writers use the pronouns according to their rhetorical purpose. In critical or expository writing, authors generally focus completely on the text and the theoretical elements used to interpret it. Because of this, it is possible for Anne Barton not to employ any narrative pronouns at all in her essays on Shakespeare's comedies in *The Riverside Shakespeare*.

In contrast to critical analyses, explanations of theory such as those found in *The Critical Experience* seek to connect with readers to explain the concepts. Thus Cowles's article in the book contains the pronoun *I*; Young's uses *you*, and Houston's exhibits a rare *one*. Simply put, these authors rely on whichever pronoun they feel will make their translations of difficult concepts as fathomable as possible to their student audience.

Closely related to theoretical explanations are instructional essays, which must establish communality and cooperation with readers in order to be effective. This is not to say that their authors have to write them in colloquial dialogue; rather, when the essays do include narrative pronouns, more of them are *you* than in the other categories of English writing that I have discussed. The essay "Teaching the Sentence and the Paragraph" in *The St. Martin's Guide to Teaching Writing* represents many other essays in the book in that it relies on imperatives and suggestions phrased with "you should" to instruct the teaching of writing. For example, the fifth chapter of *The St. Martin's Guide to Teaching Writing*, titled "Practical Issues in Teaching Writing," contains the following sentences:

In writing marginal comments, you will want to balance advice and criticism with praise. Try to avoid the temptation to comment only on form and to point out only errors. You can and should use conventional editing symbols, but do not let them be your only marginal effort. Nor should you use a mere question mark if you do not understand a section; instead, spell out your question. (pp. 85-6)

This excerpt demonstrates the practicality of the pronoun *you* in instructional writing. Not only does using *you* establish tutelary parity between the author and reader, but also it strengthens the advice in the passage from mere indirect suggestion—"Teachers should avoid the temptation"—to suggestion and even command: "Try to avoid the temptation."

## CONCLUSION

I made a surprising discovery in comparing the December 1996 *College English* issue with the *College English* of November 1957.

Since I believed that the pronoun *one* had lost favor in English-related writing, I expected to find many more instances in the 1957 issue than in the 1996 issue. The truth is, I found only one use of *one* in each issue.

The 1957 *College English* exhibited basically the same style of pronoun uses—a predominance of *we*, followed by an occasional *I* and *you* -- as the 1996 issue. This implies that some stylistic tendencies of narrative pronoun use in English writing have changed little over the past forty years.

Despite this fact, however, students like myself and the ones I followed aren't learning specific conventions for appropriate pronoun use. Professors themselves maintain their own opinions about how to

use each pronoun, and it is doubtful English writing will ever have universally accepted prescriptive rules for pronoun use. However, I have examined how English professors and teachers use pronouns to establish rhetorical positions in their own writings, and I believe the descriptive evidence I have gathered will help students learn to write with a comfortable, appropriate tone for their subject.

Remember those freshman students I described in my introduction? They managed to glean a sense of pronoun aesthetics from my crude, intuition-based suggestions for their first papers ("Try not to say *you* too much." "Don't use *one*. It sounds old."). Once they accepted on faith my pronoun conventions, they wrote their second papers with more confident authorial presence and more thoughtful reader acknowledgment. While the second set of papers still contained the usual tense switches, aimless theses, and inchoate paragraphs, at least the students expressed themselves with discursive decorum in their collective use of narrative pronouns. I had given them appropriate, albeit instinctive, advice for these critical-writing assignments, but I'd like to show them my actual findings-not only so I can back myself up with evidence, but also so I can give them pronoun guidelines for the different rhetorical situations they will face in future writing assignments.

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