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Action, Experience, and Responsibility: Using I and We in High School Writing

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Action, Experience, and Responsibility: Using I and We in High School Writing

Corinne McCumber
University of Minnesota, Morris
14 April 2018
Why don’t we use first-person pronouns?

There are locutions left over from an intellectual stance of disinterested objectivity: the ideal of conclusions issuing ‘perforce’ from reasons and arguments rather than from the play of interested positions.¹

Important uses of first-person pronouns

1. Introducing personal examples

2. Emphasizing community in a call to action

3. Reasserting an author’s responsibility for a work
Introducing personal examples

[The use of the authorial I provides] the biographical incarnation of a theoretical point that seems, well, merely theoretical when expressed only in the abstract. The authorial I is not just a stylistic option in this piece; it is its ground.²

Our first obligation, then, as rhetorical scholars is to look backwards at all the unquestioned scholarship that has come before; then, we must begin to re-map our notion of rhetorical history.³

Regaining authorial responsibility

... what this study does suggest is this: While helping students use clear topic sentences in their writing and identify variously presented topical ideas in their reading, the teacher should not pretend that professional writers largely follow the practices he is advocating.⁴

Regaining authorial responsibility

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On a few occasions where I took an idea from a paragraph but it did not seem possible to cast it in the author’s original words at all, I put the paragraph number in parentheses to indicate that. But I tried to use the author’s words as much as I could, even, in some cases, where it yielded a somewhat unwieldy entry in the outline.⁵

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Classroom Applications
Call to action

- Examine news piece calling for some sort of policy or cultural change

If Democrats want to engage rural America culturally and politically, they need to understand us, and at least some of our ideals.⁶

Personal examples

- Write a biographical paper
- Link personal experiences to broader themes

- Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*
- John Krakauer's *Into the Wild*
- Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*
Regaining responsibility

- Examine opinion pieces and scholarly works

… in 16 months, I haven't found a soul here who has ever experienced any pressure, or even endured a suggestion, to conform to the opinions expressed on the editorial page.\(^7\)

The Times needs to be careful to label opinion and its many variants. The simple addition of a slug of type reading "commentary" … would be a productive step, when appropriate; so would the introduction of consistent design signals across the various sections.\(^7\)

Concluding remarks
Thank you