

Frederick Douglass, “Learning to Read and Write” and Anita Nelson, “Fast Food, Living Fast”

In discussing class readings, we have been identifying variations in writers’ portrayals of themselves in autobiographical or self-writing. In a given piece, the “I” can be assertive, proud, remorseful, nostalgic, resilient, individualistic, embedded in community – the list goes on. If a writer is using an “I now/I then” approach, the “I” may change dramatically over time in the course of an essay. Within book-length autobiographies or memoirs, the “I” inevitably transforms during a lifetime.

Alternately, sometimes writers use the second person “you” to address the audience of readers directly. Using “you” is a less common, but sometimes quite effective, device.

Typically, writers ask themselves the questions below in choosing a style of narration in a given piece of autobiographical writing.

1. Who is my intended (primary) audience(s)?
2. How do I want to communicate with them (e.g., through humor, anger, a “cautionary” tale, nostalgia?) What reactions do I hope they have to my writing?

Assignment

- (a) Describe 19th century abolitionist Frederick Douglass’s use of the “I” in “Learning to Read and Write”, a chapter of a traditional and politically-oriented autobiography (about a paragraph). Select a few sentences that illustrate his use of the “I”. (You don’t need to comment on each sentence individually.) Who is Douglass’s intended readership? What seems to be Douglass’s primary motive(s) in writing this chapter?
- (b) Contemporary student writer Anita Nelson crafts an “in action” (*in medias res*) introductory paragraph, and then moves into second person narration in her essay “Fast Food, Living Fast.” What is the effect of the first paragraph and the second person narrative style? Choose a few sentences that seem central to the piece. Why do you think she chose this less-common form of narration?
- (c) Would you consider using third person to narrate a story of your own? How would your first essay change if you were to write it in third person?

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