

Focusing Point of View: Commentary

The prompt to read this information appears on p. 52 of *Acting on Words*.

Practice Activity—Focusing Point of View

Read the following paragraph. Determine if it has lapses in person. If you are having trouble recognizing the unwarranted shifts, see Common Error 4 in section 3 of the Handbook—Unwarranted Shift—and then try solving the shifts in this paragraph again. Two suggested revisions and commentaries follow.

Are you a college student who finds it hard to find time to study? Are you falling behind in your courses? Never fear! We at *Learning A-Z for Youth* have the answer for you. To use our exciting new product, one only has to plug it in, place it under your pillow, and learn while one is sleeping. Yes – it's that easy. We recommend that customers read our online pamphlet before purchasing our product: a machine that reads CDs of school material to them in a gentle, soothing voice while you sleep. By the time you wake up, you will be hours richer in knowledge. *Learning A-Z for Youth* guarantees you will get higher grades, or it will gladly refund the customer's money. Try our QuickLearn today—and get that A tomorrow.

Revision (Informal Style)

Altered pronouns are indicated in bolded italics.

Are you a college student who finds it hard to find time to study? Are you falling behind in your courses? Never fear! We at *Learning A-Z for Youth* have the answer for you. To use our exciting new product, ***you*** only have to plug it in, place it under your pillow, and learn while ***you*** are sleeping. Yes – it's that easy. We recommend that ***you*** read our online pamphlet before purchasing our product: a machine that reads CDs of school material to you in a gentle, soothing voice while you sleep. By

the time you wake up, you will be hours richer in knowledge. *Learning A-Z for Youth* guarantees you will get higher grades, or *we* will gladly refund your money. Try our QuickLearn today—and get that A tomorrow.

Commentary

As you can see, the revision has corrected four pronouns in order to maintain consistency of address throughout the paragraph. “Address” refers to the identity and stance of someone who is addressing someone else as well as to the identity and stance of that someone else and their shared relationship with the subject being viewed. “Address” encompasses the specific relationship between speaker, subject, and reader. Unless a shift in this established relationship is clearly warranted in the paragraph, the relationship should remain steady.

Personal pronouns enable the creation and development of these speaker-to-reader-to-subject relationships. Personal pronouns (*I*, *you*, *he*, *she*, *it*, *we*, and *they*) stand for particular people or things. As we know, a paragraph is written by someone, but that person or, in some cases, collective, may not choose to be identified as “I” or “we.” The writer(s) may prefer, for reasons of occasion and purpose, to remain behind the scenes and focus on the subject (*it* or *they*), in which case the reader (*you*) tends not to be named but to remain behind the scenes with the writer(s) in a shared stance of relative detachment. A commitment to third person, typical of much academic writing, usually means near exclusive use of that stance (both singular and plural forms of third person, as needed). Third person address generally has the effect of greater impersonality and detachment than do first and second person forms.

In revising the above paragraph, the editor decided to favour a consistent personal stance using first and second person over less personal third person address. This decision was based on a sense of the occasion and purpose. The paragraph is an advertisement, a promotion. Advertisers seek to establish and build on personal relationships (however nominal) with customers, thereby building a mood of friendliness and caring, appealing

to trust and good will. The emphasis in the relationship is (putatively) on the customer—“you.” But companies may choose to include themselves as well—as this one has—in order to personalize the company. In such cases “we” is the usual pronoun, though sometimes senior executives or other company representatives adopt “I” in order to increase the sense of a personal relationship and individual caring.

With this principle in mind, the editor has changed third person pronouns to second or first person, as appropriate to the meaning intended. “One” is a third person gender-neutral pronoun meaning “a person.” North America tends to consider this pronoun as overly formal, even pretentious, so it is often converted to “you.” This conversion, however, results in a significantly increased tone of informality. In the above revision, informality is desired. The use of “one” in the original of that paragraph has a jarring effect, but in much scholarly writing the use of “you” to mean “one” may seem confusing and inappropriate (“you” seems to be addressing the reader directly and thereby shifts stance and purpose to serve an informal relationship). Here is an alternative revision of the above paragraph, this time using academic third person. Clearly this choice is not suited to the purpose or material, at least not as coming from the company directly, but it illustrates technically the changes that occur and the forms that need to be maintained to achieve a firm address throughout a paragraph and longer piece of writing. Note that this paragraph does not use “you” to mean “a person,” and in some cases your instructors may recommend that you avoid that usage as well.

Revision (Formal Style)

Words standing in for altered pronouns are indicated in bolded italics.

Many college ***students*** have difficulty finding time to study, thereby falling behind in ***their*** courses. ***Some*** might wish to explore a possible recourse offered by *Learning A-Z for Youth*. The ***company*** offers a new product that ***it*** maintains is simple to use and effective. ***Users*** plug the product in, place it under ***their*** pillow, and absorb information while sleeping. The ***company*** recommends that ***customers***

read the online pamphlet before purchasing the product: a machine that reads CDs of school material to *users* in a gentle, soothing voice while *they* sleep. The company maintains that when *users* wake up, *they* will be “hours richer in knowledge.” *Learning A-Z for Youth* guarantees that *users* will achieve higher grades, or *it* will “gladly refund the customer’s money.”

Commentary

Note that along with the conversion of address to third person, other stylistic changes have entered into the paragraph. It has, in fact, become a translation from the language of advertising and business into the language of academic exposition. Pronouns are now entirely third person (although the editor in this case has decided against the sometimes un-North American sounding “one” by turning certain statements into the plural). The company is referred to in third person singular rather than plural (*it* rather than *they*), a feature of formal academic exposition. Direct appeals to the reader as questions or intensified assurances have been removed. Sentences are longer, and vocabulary is more formal and neutral. An attitude of reporting what is said and remaining open to test these claims has replaced the former attitude of complete assurance. Certain claims are enclosed in quotation marks to emphasize that they are being reported, not claimed as truth. As this suggests, with a commitment to a certain address, to a certain use of personal pronouns, comes an assumption of a certain tone, and that assumption will alter more than the pronouns. Decisions related to certain words (especially key ingredients of stance or address) will usually affect other words and structures.

For promotional impact, the second revision may seem like a weakling compared to the first, but its new tone of relative neutrality might reassure some readers. It may have some of the qualities and effects of what is called a “soft sell.” The writer sounds objective, so readers may consider that he or she has taken the time to determine that this product at least deserves further consideration. In this way, the neutral stance can achieve something of the effect of concession-refutation structure

discussed in Chapter 16 of *Acting on Words*. The tone of detachment or impartiality implies a concession that perhaps the product is simply exaggerated by the company, which gains the reader's trust in the writer if not the product. A concession sometimes helps to overcome a possible immediate rejection.

Perhaps Othello wrote the first revision while Iago wrote the second. As an advertiser might say, "do yourself the favour" of reading or re-reading Shakespeare's *Othello*, then see the commentary "Othello's Misuse of the Syllogism" at Chapter 3 of this website.