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“There Be Dragons: The Pedagogy of the First Person”

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For any writer, especially journalists, the first person, what we used to call the use of the *vertical pronoun*, is perhaps a double-edged sword. It can work really well for a variety of reasons, but it is also very dangerous. An easy analogy might be Botox, which many people believe can make them incredibly beautiful. But we all know Botox is derived from the acutely lethal bacteria that causes botulism.¹ If you are playing with such a pathogen, untoward outcomes, decidedly unwished-for consequences, are possible.

It can even be argued that the risks of using the first person exceed those of a double-edged sword. Imagine, if you will, another sword, a *multi-edged* one. Perhaps a physical impossibility, existing only in the metaphysical—or is it metaphorical?—realm. How many ways might it be capable of injuring its wielder? Yes, it is indisputable that the possibilities for the misuse of the first person are vast, so much so that it is not an overstatement to suggest that many journalism educators find it abhorrent, banning it from all written assignments.

Nevertheless, I have a strong inclination to allow, sometimes even encourage, students to use the first person. I particularly like the advice offered by Howard Pyle’s Prince Hal. Loosely based on the 15th century Henry V of England, the fictional historical character was surely correct when he warned, “It is ill to idle with edged tools.”² So when advising students on deploying the first person in the written journalistic assignments, it is critical that they understand that it has to be done very, very carefully. There is a fine line between success and failure. Or perhaps another way to look at it: the risk and the reward. The risks are considerable, but so are the potential rewards.

Considering the subject of teaching the use of the first person, I have a few observations. The first applies at the aspect of *story conceptualization*. When first considering the possibility of the first person, the student must first be assured that the end result meets a very stern test, the essence of which is: Who cares? If you introduce yourself into the story, is there a reason for the reader to have some empathy with, some concern or perhaps even pity for—some authentic reaction—to the narrator? Moreover, when a student is first conceiving a story idea, in my experience there often seems to be no better way to engage their curiosity, their own interests, their passions. It may be a little heretical, but it is often useful to say in the classroom, “Find a topic about which *you* care.” As we know, many—perhaps even most—young adults are not yet aware of the subjects about which they deeply care. If this approach helps them proceed on that particular journey, I am happy to believe that that in itself is probably a worthwhile end.

Sallie Tisdale, whose work I am sure you know, is one of the truly extraordinary practitioners of journalism. She is also someone incredibly skilled at the profoundly moving use of the first person. Indeed, much of what she writes is in the first person, and I must confess that I am in awe of the level she attains. She also occasionally leads workshops and often begins with the following challenge: “If you want to find a topic about which you will write the best piece of nonfiction you will ever write, try to think of the things you’re not allowed to write. Think of the things that you do not have permission to write. Think of the stories within you that you are afraid that your friends, your lover, your mother will disapprove of. Those are the most powerful stories you can tell.”³

A second aspect has to do with *reporting transparency*. It is true that the use of the first person can be an unnecessary distraction, inserted where it doesn’t belong. It can interrupt story flow, defeating any attempt at that worthy goal, terse eloquence. Used improperly, it is self-defeating. But a possible positive aspect is reporting transparency; the first-person voice gives the writer a chance to take the reader *there*. For example, the first-person narrator is not only a storyteller but also something of a travel guide, the reader’s partner, adding both authenticity and texture to the journey.

Another element is the *self-revelatory aspect* of first-person journalism. In my classroom experience, acts of self-exposure are not typical behavior for most college students. If anything, the default is a strenuous effort to mask exposure. And when students are given an opportunity—even encouragement—to deploy the first person, it is not always certain to produce a good result.

On the downside, the “diarist impulse” can emerge. Or the result can be an overly internalized memoir, “navel-gazing” if one is unkind. Or perhaps profoundly un-universal observations draw from the shallows of a young author’s life. The rigidity of chronological structure can also be an issue. Simply put, it can bare edges of our metaphorical sword that can lead to serious self-injury.

On the upside, however, it can be argued that a bit of self-revelation borne of the first person can be very empowering. Once students get to try it a bit, it opens a whole new range of writing for them. In addition, there is another outcome that is fairly common. A student attempts a very aspiring self-revelatory piece using the first person perspective—and then has subsequent regrets. And then they will request, “Can you please not make me share this with the other students? Can this please be between you and me?” Or they may go even further and ask that the piece never be submitted for any sort of contest. A wonderful teachable moment, this sets the stage for a gentle conversation with the student centered on the fact that we are journalists, not memoirists or diarists. We write for public print. I close with a compliment and a bit of cautionary counsel: “When you write something powerful, you have no choice but to own it. It is not only yours, it is you. And if you feel any discomfort, you must learn to live with it. Because that is what we do.”

I have a treasured letter on the topic from a long-ago, late mentor. He wrote, “When you write for the public print, you’re going to write about people you know. Because the only people you can say anything real about are the people that you know. So you’re going to write about them, and they are not going to like it. They may even hate it—and you. But if you are lucky, it will only be for a while.”

A fourth consideration concerns *authorial voice*. There are many challenges for students using the first person, but one of the most difficult is finding their writerly voice. I suspect that the reason for this is that they are not clear about the nature, character, world view and tone of their narrator.⁴ After much experimentation, a definition of narrator that I’ve found seems effective in the classroom is the following: “As a reader, when you reading a piece the narrator is the voice that you are hearing in your ear. As a writer, the narrator is not you but rather a voice you have decided is the best to use.” Students seem to understand that, but it can still be a difficult concept to grasp. Used deftly, however, a command of the voice can endow the student with a unique level of authorial authority.

A good example of this is the *meta-story* approach, “the story of the story” can be introduced into the narrative. Writers for the *New Yorker* often take advantage of this approach. Rather than writing “a highly placed official said,” when covering national security affairs Seymour Hersh⁵ might report, “a highly placed official met me at a bar and revealed that. . . .” It takes the reader there. Moreover, the authorial first-person voice allows students serve to other ends. It make it possible to *reify sources*, to add revealing tonal detail. “ABC, nervously straightening the papers on his desk, told me XYZ” In addition, I suggest to students that the deft use of the first person can contribute additional qualities which can enrich their narratives.⁶ For instance, there is the *authoritative*, where the narrator says, “I saw” or “I experienced.” Or the *emotive*, where then narrator confesses, “I felt” or “I feared”—scribal analogues of the reaction shot in video. Or the *analytical*: “I thought” or I suspected.”

To return again to Sallie Tisdale, in the 1990s she published a wonderful piece in *Harper’s* magazine entitled “Talk Dirty to Me.”⁷ The basis for a later book of the same title, the work uses a first-person female narrator and explores her possible interest in pornography. The first-person tone is thoughtful and intelligent yet also confessional and intimate. Near the end of the piece, the is a sleight-of-hand star turn. While browsing in a video store (yes, it is the 1990s), the narrator asks for a particular pornographic film.

Four clerks huddle around me and the [store’s] computer, watching me type the title [I want], offering little suggestions. From across the store I can still hear the helpful clerk. “Hey, Al,” he’s shouting. “Lady over here wants [title of film]. We got that?” I still blush; I stammer to say these things out loud. Sex has eternal charm that way—a perpetual, organic hold on my body. I am aroused right now writing this.

And then, in the next sentence, the narrator plays a lovely trick on her readers, switching from the first to the second person to directly address them. She asks, “Are you, dear reader? Do you dream, too?” Both colleagues and students have told me that every time they read this passage they involuntary look up—with uncertain feelings of embarrassment as well as perhaps a *frisson* of guilt—to check if anyone is watching them.

One last observation about permitting the use of the first person in written assignments is that it clearly gives the students the freedom to explore ideas, topics and places where they are otherwise not likely to go. At the same time, it valorizes the students’ own curiosity. Releasing them from the confines of conventional form, it gives them permission to be deeply and personally interested in a subject, to be committed to rendering it in full. Most importantly, they

learn to take risks—intellectual, cultural and even emotional risks. And I suppose that I should admit to believing that it is outside one’s comfort zone where where much of true learning takes place.

In closing, we must acknowledge that many journalism educators, particularly those charged with teaching early skills classes, pro-actively forbid the first person. I respect their perception. There can be no argument: Craft is indeed the foundation of art. But beyond those first classes, the experience of using the first person has many things it can teach students. Among the points I attempt to get across is that it is okay to care, and that students’ own interests may be where their best stories will come from.

Please stick out your hand, I ask them. Take this first-person sword and learn to use it well. But always remember that it has many, many edges. All are very, very sharp.

¹ U.S. Food and Drug Administration, *Foodborne Illness & Contaminants* <<http://www.fda.gov/food/foodborneillnesscontaminants/causesofillnessbadbugbook/ucm070000.htm>>, accessed 14 August 2015.

² Howard Pyle, *Men of Iron* (Southall, U.K.: Global Grey Books, 1891, 2016), 120.

³ Sallie Tisdale, interview by author, 7 May 2007, Chicago, tape recording. For more information on Tisdale, see <<http://sallietisdale.com>>.

⁴ For an insightful analysis of the role of narrative, see Barbara Zelizer, "Achieving Journalistic Authority Through Narrative," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 7.4 (May 2009): 366-376. See also Marie Vanoost, "Questioning Journalistic Identity Through an Analysis of the Narratorial Stance in Literary Journalism" (paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass communication, August 2013 <<http://hdl.handle.net/2078.1/136988>>).

⁵ To access recent *New Yorker* work by Hersch, see <<http://www.newyorker.com/contributors/seymour-m-hersh>>.

⁶ An aside: It can usefully be understood that some of the examples that follow fall in a curious realm: that of the writer as both an observer of reality and an actor in the story. Pushing the concept even further, one might say the real task is to find the sweet spot between the two.

⁷ Sallie Tisdale, "Talk Dirty to Me," *Harper's Magazine*, February 1992, 37-46.