

When to Use “I” or Self-Narration

by Eric Wiessinger

Definition:

Self-narration is the use of first person in a narrative format. To narrate is defined as “to tell a story or give an account.” An example of self-narration is: “In this essay I will...”

Self-narration is a style:

Unlike grammar, spelling, or any other right or wrong issue, self-narration is sometimes appropriate, and at other times it is not.

Appropriate:

- I spent my summers as a young man fishing in the creek behind my house and catching insects in the fields.

Inappropriate:

- In this report I will explain why the hypothesis about plant growth and miracle grow is true.

The first sentence is clearly a story about the author. In this case, self-narration is the goal of the writer. The second sentence makes a formal experimental report also sound like a story about the writer, which it is not. **It places the focus on the writer, rather than the topic.**

When to Use “I”:

- *Sometimes* Clarkson Seminar (i.e. Journals)
- Creative writing
- Personal writing
- Informal memos & reports

When Not to Use “I”:

- Formal lab reports
- Clarkson Seminar (i.e. Literary analysis)
- Most engineering, business or science papers & reports

It is important to understand when to use self-narration and when not to. When in doubt, however, it is usually not appropriate to use it.

Focus:

Self-narration can shift the focus off of the material or topic and onto the writer. When the topic *is* the author or his/her opinions, this style choice is a good thing, but academic papers usually require the focus to be on the topic. Let's look at the first example of inappropriate use again.

Writer-Centered:

- In this report I will explain why the hypothesis about plant growth and miracle grow is true.

Removing the self-narrative style shifts the focus from the writer and to the experimental findings. Professional readers expect this focus.

Topic-Centered:

- The experiment supported the hypothesis about plant growth and Miracle Grow.

The first sentence above engages the reader in the writer's process *and* the experiment.

The second untangles the two and makes a clearer focus for the reader. In any writing task, consider your focus.

Let's look at some other examples.

Writer-Centered:

- In this essay, I will show that Richard III was a good king according to Machiavelli.

Topic-Centered:

- Machiavelli would have considered Richard III a good king.

The first sentence involves the reader in the writer's thought process. This is equivalent to having a brainstorming session with the reader. These personal narrations throughout a paper can irritate or bore the reader who expects a focus on the course material.

Use "I" to Get Started:

Try using self-narration in the rough draft. Self-narration, a lot like brainstorming, can be a good way to get started on a writing assignment. The free flow of ideas that comes from this style can be very helpful to writers who have trouble getting started or getting ideas.

After the ideas have been generated, the writer can then revise the draft. Go back through the paper and rewrite it to shift the focus off of the writer's process and onto the topic, just as in the above examples. Below are examples of a writer-centered paragraph and its revision.

Writer-Centered First draft:

In my opinion Odysseus is not much of a hero. It seems to me like he does everything for selfish reasons, and I don't think that goes along with the definition of a hero. I have found this to be true for two main reasons. One, Odysseus seems to think his men are expendable. He has no problem allowing them to be killed in his attempts to return home. Two, I think Odysseus is contemptible for cheating on his wife for so long, and then expecting her to welcome him back. Although Odysseus is cast as a hero in the poem, I don't think he fits the role based on these transgressions.

Revision:

Odysseus in Homer's *Odyssey* is not a true hero. Heroes are selfless, and Odysseus' actions are selfish. Two ongoing themes in the poem make this abundantly clear. One, Odysseus considers his men to be expendable. He has no problem allowing them to be killed in his attempts to return home. Two, Odysseus spends years cheating on his wife, but then expects her to welcome him back. Although Odysseus is cast as a hero in the poem, his transgressions prevent him from fitting the role.

These examples show how self-narrative technique can be used to brainstorm ideas. Fairly minor revisions can then convert the writer-centered draft into a topic-centered piece of writing.