

Hiding the 'I' in fiction and nonfiction – Marlin Barton (2007)

A good number of years ago now, I gave a draft of a short story written in the first-person point of view to Dale Ray Phillips, who is, in my estimation, a master of the first person voice (see his collection **My People's Waltz**). He read the story, called "Longer Than Summer," said some nice things about it, offered suggestions, and then made the offhand comment, "And you need to go through it and hide the 'I'." When I asked him what he meant, he said that I'd overused that particular personal pronoun. Too many of my sentences began with "I saw," "I thought," "I couldn't believe," and the repetition made for awkward prose. After reading back through the first few paragraphs, I realised his point was obvious. I tried my hand at rewriting a few lines and found it difficult. Then Dale Ray sat down, and in just a few minutes he'd hidden about fifteen 'I's in the first three pages – and the difference was clear. The prose was much smoother, the story stronger.

Other than creating awkward and repetitive prose, overuse of the first-person pronoun can suggest to a reader that your character or narrator is self-centred and narcissistic, and if that's not the case your prose style is working against your story. If your character is self-centred and narcissistic, the constant use of I isn't the best way to demonstrate, or show, those qualities. The repetition will simply become obnoxious and irritating to your reader. Sometimes the small details can make or break a piece of writing. So a little time spent practicing hiding the 'I' can serve your writing well.

The Exercises

Exercise 1:

On the next page is a passage from the rough draft of the story mentioned above. Read through it and look for simple phrases that can be cut or reworded and independent clauses that might be made dependent. Also try shifting the focus from what the narrator sees the other characters do to describing in a more direct manner what that other character's actions are. Then try your hand at a rewrite and see how many of the thirteen 'I's you can hide.

I picked Jimmy Neal like he was some kind of prize off the shelf at a carnival, like he was a stuffed bear or a box of candy. I picked him as sure as these summer nights are hot as oven heat. I didn't know I was going to choose anybody until I saw him at the Bait Shop. Then I knew, all of a sudden, that I had to pick someone. Someone for my summer. I had to pick him. And that's what I did.

Maybe it was because of his sweet red mouth or his pale blue eyes, eyes the lightness of the watercolours I used to paint when I was little. Jimmy Neal had such pale blond hair too, I thought, like a little boy's before it darkens. He looked too sweet almost. I knew he wasn't my usual type.

Exercise 2:

Take a look at a piece of your own writing, count the number of 'I's in the first page and see if you can remove a quarter of them.

Reference

Barton, M. (2007) 'Hiding the *I* in fiction and nonfiction', in Johnston, B. A. (ed.) *Naming the World and Other Exercises for the Creative Writer*. New York: Random House, pp. 317 - 319