Consider Your Readers and Point of View

If you are to take your subject with all the seriousness it deserves and yourself with as much skeptical humor as you can bear, how are you to take your readers? Who are they, anyway? You must indeed sense your audience's capacity, its susceptibilities and prejudices, if you are to win even a hearing. Consider your audience a mixed group of intelligent and reasonable adults. You want them to think of you as well informed and well educated. You wish to explain what you know and what you believe. You wish to persuade them pleasantly that what you know is important and what you believe is right. Try to imagine what they might ask you, what they might object to, what they might know already, what they might find interesting. Be simple and clear, amusing and profound, using plenty of illustrations to show what you mean. But do not talk down to them. That is the great flaw in the slumming theory of communication. Bowing to your readers' supposed level, you insult them by assuming their inferiority. Thinking yourself humble, you are actually haughty. The best solution is simply to assume that your readers are as intelligent as you. Even if they are not, they will be flattered by the assumption. Your written language, in short, will be respectful toward your subject, considerate toward your readers, and somehow amiable toward human failings.

Pronouns establish your point of view: I, one, we, you. The essay normally proceeds in the third person with assertions and facts: Jogging is good for the heart and soul. It improves circulation. Casting that in the first person, with I, limits both evidence and authority to just the singular view, the merely personal. But I is effective for an illustration from personal experience or for easing an assertion: "Clifton, I think, misses the point." Moving from I to one generalizes in the right direction, expanding the viewpoint from the singular first person to the collective third, from I am sure to One is sure. But one can seem too formal and get too thick:

- Faulty: One finds one's opinion changing as one grows older.
- Revised: Opinions change with age.
- Revised: Our opinions change as we grow older.

That we is sometimes a useful generalizer, a convenient haven between the isolating I and the impersonal one. We can seem pompous, but not if it honestly handles those experiences we know we share, or can share.

As we watch program after program, we are progressively bored, and we begin to wonder what values, if any, they represent.

The indefinite you, and sometimes the indefinite they, is usually too vague, too adolescent.

- Faulty: You have your own opinion.
- Questionable: They have their own opinions.
- Revised: Everyone has their own opinions.
- Revised: We all have our own opinions.

You as direct address to the reader poses a different problem. This handout is consistently addressed to you, the reader. But this is a special case, the relationship of tutor to student projected onto the page. The writer's stance in an essay is a little more formal, a little more public. Writers are better holding their pronouns to one or we, an occasional I, or none at all.