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# HOW TO AVOID REPEATING 'I' IN FIRST-PERSON WRITING

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## Why reduce the 'I'

Your novel's written in first person. Here are some tips for how to ensure your narrative doesn't become overloaded with 'I' but remains immersive.

We might think that the mention of 'I' would always make prose more immediate, and draw the reader in closer to the viewpoint character. But often the opposite is true. Too much 'I' is a tap on the shoulder, one that says to the reader, 'Just in case you've forgotten who the narrator is, here are lots of reminders.'

The consequence is that readers are pulled away. And that can actually increase rather than reduce narrative distance.



# Why 'I' still has a place front and centre

I confess to being a huge fan of first-person narrations. When done well, the pronoun is almost invisible, even if it's used frequently. Certainly the books I've borrowed excerpts from here allow 'I' to take centre stage. However, they **don't rely on a first-person pronoun** to convey experience, thought, speech and action. In this booklet, I'll show you some examples – ones that ensure the intimacy of the narration style is left intact.

While we don't want to obliterate 'I', because avoiding it completely would render the prose awkward, inauthentic and overworked, too much 'I' can be repetitive and interruptive. What's required is a balance. My aim is to offer you choice – fitting alternatives that retain intimacy and immediacy when you're concerned you've overdone it.



# Focus on the exterior rather than the interior

With a first-person narration, what's reported must be through the lens of the narrator. Since their presence is a given, we don't need to be reminded that 'I' is involved.

A little peppering in a more objective report will suffice because the reader knows that it's coming from the narrator, and only the narrator. It has to be.

And while writers can make space to explore the viewpoint character's emotional behaviour, the exterior world is what grounds their experience in the novel's physical world. It gives the novel substance, and the reader something to bite into.



Instead of focusing on who's doing the reporting, shift the prose towards what's being reported.

What and who else is in the scene? Why are they there? How do they behave? What do they look like? This information can be reported without 'I' so that the reader experiences the physical world within which the narrator is operating.

Over the page is an example from *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Harper Lee, Pan, 1974, p. 11).



Maycomb was an old town, but it was a tired old town when I first knew it. In rainy weather the streets turned to red slop; grass grew on the sidewalks, the court-house sagged in the square. Somehow, it was hotter then; a black dog suffered on a summer's day; bony mules hitched to Hoover carts flicked flies in the sweltering shade of the live oaks on the square. Men's stiff collars wilted by nine in the morning. Ladies bathed before noon, after their three o'clock naps, and by nightfall were like soft tea-cakes with frostings of sweat and sweet talcum.

People moved slowly then. They ambled across the square, shuffled in and out of the stores around it, took their time about everything. A day was twenty-four hours long but seemed longer. There was no hurry, for there was nowhere to go, nothing to buy and no money to buy it with, nothing to see outside the boundaries of Maycomb County. But it was a time of vague optimism for some of the people: Maycomb County had recently been told that it had nothing to fear but fear itself.



Notice the (almost) absence of 'I'. Scout – our narrator – tells us about the town she lived in: Maycomb. The recollection is hers certainly – 'when I first knew it' anchors it as such. It's therefore intimate.

And yet because there's only one I-nudge, we're allowed enough emotional distance to step back and pan, like a roving camera, across Maycomb's vista. We're dislocated from Scout's *doing* the experiencing and encouraged instead to focus on *what* she's experiencing.

What's happening here is a **shift from the subjective to the objective.**



Here's an example of a short excerpt that's **subjective**. The focus is on the I-narrator.

I'm stunned by the news. Not that Hatchet has been up since early this morning, but that he has a wife. Someone actually sleeps with the man.

And here's the real excerpt from David Rosenfelt's *Play Dead* (Grand Central, 2009, p. 19). Now the focus is **objective**, yet in no way does this distance us from the centrality of the first-person narrator's experience. We're still deep in his head.

This is a stunning piece of news. Not that Hatchet has been up since early this morning, but that he has a wife. Someone actually sleeps with the man.





## Reduce the use of filter words

Filter words are a clue that an interior rather than exterior focus is in play. They're verbs that increase the narrative distance, reminding us that what we're reading is being told by someone rather than experienced, or shown, through the eyes of the character.

Examples include: noticed, seemed, spotted, saw, realized, felt, thought, wondered, believed, knew, and decided.

Filter focus the reader's gaze inwards (interior focus) on the manner through which the viewpoint character experiences the world – the *how*.



They come with a pronoun: **I** saw, **they** believed, **we** decided, **she** knew, **he** noticed.

By removing filter words, the reader's gaze is shifted outwards (exterior focus) and onto what is being experienced. That can make for a more immersive read. Plus, the omission means we say goodbye to their accompanying pronoun: 'I'.

Here are a few examples to give you a flavour of how you might recast in a way that avoids first-person filtering.



**'I' plus filter word. Reader's gaze is inwards, on the *how***

**I recall** the argument we had last week.

**I recognized** the man's face.

**I saw** the guy turn left and dart into the alley.

**I spotted** the red Chevy from yesterday parked outside the bank.

**I still feel** ashamed about the vile words I unleashed even after all these years.

**Recast: Reader's gaze drawn outwards towards the *what***

Last week's argument is still fresh in my mind.

The man's face was familiar.

The guy turned left and darted into the alley.

There, parked outside the bank, was the same red Chevy from yesterday.

The vile words I unleashed still have the power to bathe me in shame even after all these years.



## Remove speech and thought tags

Dialogue tags are what writers use to indicate which character is speaking. Their function is, for the most part, mechanical. If the reader can keep track of who's saying what in a conversation, you can omit dialogue tags.

This will work best if there are no more than two characters. Most writers don't extend the omission for more than a few back-and-forths before they introduce a reminder tag or an action beat.

Watching out for unnecessary tags is good practice regardless of narration style, but with a first-person narration it's a particularly efficient way to declutter 'I'-heavy prose.



Take a look at this excerpt from David Rosenfelt's *Play Dead*, pp. 194-5. There are two characters in this scene: Andy Carpenter, the protagonist and narrator, and Sam Willis, the non-POV character on the other end of the phone.

“Great!” he says, making no effort to conceal his delight. He's probably hoping it results in another high-speed highway shooting.

“The woman's name is Donna Banks. She lives in apartment twenty-three-G in Sunset Towers in Fort Lee. I don't have the exact address, but you can get it.”

“Pretty swanky apartment,” he says.

“Right. I want you to find out the source of that swank.”

“What does that mean?”

“I want to know how she can afford it. She doesn't work, and she's the widow of a soldier. Maybe her name is Banks because her family owns a bunch of them, but I want to know for sure.”



"Got it."

"No problem?" I ask. I'm always amazed at Sam's ability to access any information he needs. "Not so far. Anything else?"

"Yes. I left her apartment at ten thirty-five this morning. I want to know if she called anyone shortly after I left, and if so, who."

"Gotcha. Which do you want me to get on first? Although neither will take very long."

"I guess her source of income."

"Then say it, Andy."

"Say what?"

"Come on, play the game. You're asking me to find out where she gets her cash. So say it."

"Sam ..."

"Say it."

"Okay. Show me the money."

"Thatta boy. I'll get right on it."



The exchange involves 19 speech elements within the thread, but only 3 speech tags, and only one of those marks our first-person narrator.

At no point do we lose track, and at no point are we distracted by repetitive 'I said's.

## Apply the principles of free indirect speech

If you've played with free indirect speech (also called free indirect style/discourse) in third-person narratives, call on your craft for first-person narration.

In a nutshell, free indirect speech offers the essence of first-person dialogue or thought but through a third-person viewpoint. The character's voice takes the lead, but without the clutter of speech marks, speech tags, italic, or other devices to indicate who's thinking or saying what.



Here's an example of **third-person narration**. Notice the filter words 'glanced' and 'noticed', the italic present-tense thought, and the thought tag:

Dave glanced at the guy's hand and noticed that the signature tattoo was missing. *Christ, maybe my intel's been compromised again,* he thought.

Let's change that to a **first-person narration**. The filter words are still there and there's a thought tag with the 'I' pronoun.

I glanced at the guy's hand and noticed that the signature tattoo was missing. *Christ, maybe my intel's been compromised again,* I thought.





Here's what the **third-person version** could look like in **free indirect style**. The filter words and tags are gone. It feels like a first-person thought but the base tense and third-person narration remain intact.

The signature tattoo on the guy's hand was missing. Christ, had his intel been compromised again?

And now the **first-person version**. All I've done is swapped out the pronoun 'his' for 'my'.

The signature tattoo on the guy's hand was missing. Christ, had my intel been compromised again?



# Take the 'I' out of introspection

There's nothing wrong with contemplation and introspection. Authentic characters ruminate just like real people.

However, when prose is littered rather than peppered with constructions such as *I wasn't sure if, I didn't know whether, I wondered if*, it can feel muddled and be laborious to read.

The reader might respond: Well, of course *you're* wondering. Who else could it be? You're the narrator.



Worse, readers might think the narrator's rather self-absorbed and unsure of themselves.

While that might be necessary now and then, it's problematic if it's a staple because a narrator who's always focused on themselves, and who never instils confidence in us, can't tell the story as effectively.

Look out for 'I'-centred introspection and experiment with statements and questions that allow the 'I' to be assumed.

Here are a few examples to show you how it might work.



## 'I'-centred introspection

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I wasn't sure if Shami was a reliable witness but I couldn't afford to ignore her, given what she'd divulged.

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I still didn't know who the killer was.

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I wondered whether Shami was a reliable witness.

## 'I'-less introspection

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Was Shami a reliable witness? Maybe, maybe not. She couldn't be ignored given what she'd divulged.

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The killer's identity was still a mystery.

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Shami might or might not be a reliable witness.

Shami's reliability as a witness was hardly a given.

Shami's reliability as a witness was questionable.



## Balance 'I' with 'we'

Another option is to consider whether your narrator's lived experience at particular points within the novel involves others.

This is an opportunity to frame the narrative around 'we' rather than just 'I'.

Here's an excerpt from *To Kill a Mockingbird* (p. 162) in which Scout, Harper Lee's first-person narrator, frames the recollection around not just her own experience but those of the people she was hanging out with.



As the county **went by us**, Jem gave Dill the histories and general attitudes of the more prominent figures: M4 Tensaw Jones voted the straight Prohibition ticket; Miss Emily Davis dipped snuff in private; Mr Byron Waller could play the violin; Mr Jake Slade was cutting his third set of teeth.

A wagonload of unusually stern-faced citizens appeared. When they pointed to Miss Maudie Atkinson's yard, ablaze with summer flowers, Miss Maudie herself came out on the porch. There was an odd thing about Miss Maudie – on her porch she was **too far away for us** to see her features clearly, but **we could** always catch her mood by the way she stood. She was now standing arms akimbo, her shoulders drooping a little, her head cocked to one side, her glasses winking in the sunlight.



The effect is powerful because we're *shown* rather than told a sense of her belonging, of her being in a group, of the togetherness of that experience. And that intensifies our immersion in her world.

## Summing up

There's nothing wrong with 'I', but a first-person narrator can tell a story without relying on their pronoun all the time. Since they're the ones doing the reporting, the 'I' can often be assumed.

Try recasting sentences that start with 'I' more objectively, so that the focus is on the what – the emotion, the object, the person, the action and so on – rather than the sense being used to experience it or the I-narrator doing the experience.



Use the principles of free indirect speech to reduce your 'I' count. It's a tool that encourages a narrowing of narrative distance to such a degree that the reader feels deeply connected to the viewpoint character – more like we're reading a thought than straight narrative.

As for speech and thought tags, you might not need as many as you think. The speaker can usually be identified without them if there are only two people in the conversation. Removing redundant tags is worth considering whichever narration style you're writing in.





# Related resources

## BOOKS

- *Editing Fiction at Sentence Level: A Guide for Beginner and Developing Writers*
- *Making Sense of Point of View: Transform Your Fiction 1*
- *Making Sense of Punctuation: Transform Your Fiction 2*
- *Making Sense of 'Show, Don't Tell': Transform Your Fiction 3*

## COURSES

- **Switching to Fiction: Course for new fiction editors**
- **How to Write the Perfect Fiction Editorial Report: Course for fiction editors**

