

## Communication 4312 – Writing In the First Person

The most important suggestion I can make about writing in the first person is this: be extremely careful with the first person pronoun, I.

Limit the use of I. Find as many ways as you can to write about yourself without using I. Especially avoid having I at the beginning of a paragraph.

To be effective, the first person story has got to be about something bigger than and more important than yourself. Rarely will the story with you at the center be something that a bunch of people will want to read.

Exceptions abound, of course. Did I ever tell you the story about getting knocked down by a car in Oakland, California? Well, maybe I will. Not all that important, and I doubt the interest level is very high.

I've had memoirs from students that are exceptions. I think of Shiley Carter. Do you know her? She's a great example of a person with a compelling story. Even then, though, the story is more than about her.

The best first person stories are stories you tell about others – about incidents, friends, acquaintances, places you visited, etc. In those stories, you as a writer fall into the background the more you bring the other person to the fore. It's a wonderful story-telling device.

I've been preaching very hard on a template for writing. You ought to know this by heart now: have a good lead, get everything organized, use quotes, end it. Just because you're doing another kind of story, don't abandon that approach. I think you'll find out that it works almost every time. [I am leaving myself open to exceptions, of course.]

Great writing does something more than tell a story. You make a point with the writing. You get across an important truth. You share with the reader something that lies beneath the surface. When this approach works, it attracts the reader into the story.

To accomplish this, look for the story within the story. Maybe what's on the surface is one story. But beneath that story – within that story – is yet another story that is really the important story and the story you are trying to tell.

And, be very, very careful with chronology !!! Take hold of the material and put it in the order that works best for the story.

■ David McHam