

SPEAKING TO THE READER

When you discuss materials with the teacher or another student, it really helps your learning process.

If you are interested in finding out about the behavior of groups of people, you should take Anthropology 100.

Now, you may be saying to yourself, "how can a dance class help me in these ways?"

Each of these sentences comes from a College English essay. What do they assume? The writer is, of course, a student, but who is the reader? The essay is submitted for grading by a teacher who may well benefit from the advice contained in the essay but who already knows about the benefits of class discussion and who is probably not in a position to take a dance class or an anthropology course. However, using the second-person "you" in these essays implies that the reader is a student who wants to know how to learn or what classes to take. Thus there is a serious gap between the intended reader and the real one. If these sentences appeared in essays which pretended to be directed toward a student audience, "you" would be appropriate, but in most essays the second person is inappropriate.

In much practical writing, the author does not know precisely who the reader will be; the news writer, for instance, must speak to a large and varied audience, while the writer of a report may have a more limited audience but still not know the individuals. Both of these writers must constantly monitor their phrasing to be sure that they do not speak inappropriately. The college English student has an even more difficult task: to write an essay which can be read by the teacher and which will also be appropriate for a more general audience of students, teachers, and other people as well.

How can a writer avoid using "you"? One possibility is to write objectively:

Discussing material with the teacher or another student can be educational.

People who are interested in finding out about the behavior of groups should take Anthropology 100.

How can a dance class help someone in any of these areas?

These examples use nouns ("student," "people") and indefinite pronouns ("someone") to replace the direct address to the reader; if they used any personal pronouns, the appropriate ones would be "he," "she," and "they." For very formal writing, "one" can be used in moderation; however, in informal writing, it is likely to sound clumsy and pretentious.

If the objective approach feels too stiff or awkward, personal phrasing could be better. In such cases, the first person singular or plural will preserve the personal contact between reader and writer without implying that the writer is giving orders to a reader.

When I discuss material with a teacher or other students, I learn a great deal.

Those of us who are interested in finding out about the behavior of groups of people and of ourselves should take Anthropology 100.

So I asked myself, "how can a dance class help me?"

Removing "you" from an essay may be very difficult, but a writer who has chosen a good subject and who is aware of the need for getting the right response from the audience will take the trouble to find the right phrasing.