

You and we

The Craft of Writing · By Simon Townsend · 1 min read

I know you see it in respectable, professional publications all the damn time. But I wish my students wouldn't use "you", "we", "your" and "us". Who are these mysterious "you" and "we" and "us"? In some writing (especially travel writing or advice writing), many journalists use the horrible "you". YOU get on a plane. YOU should take this pill. YOU must do this exercise. YOU walk here. YOU swim there. When YOU visit this hotel YOU will see this, and then YOU should eat here and YOU will do this and YOU will do that. It sounds like a schoolteacher talking to a classroom full of little kids. Who is YOU and WE supposed to be? The reader? The reader usually has no intention of doing all these actions YOU THE WRITER DID or that you are reporting someone else doing. The reader wants to know what the writer did, what happened to the writer and how the writer felt about what happened. Use "I". Or tell of what happened to some other person. Readers who don't travel, don't have the illness or disability or psychological problem you are writing about, are STILL interested in your story although it has NOTHING to do with the reader personally. Please avoid the ugly, illogical, amateur device of talking to the reader as if he must be personally involved. And then journalists write nonsense like this: "We all grew up loving The Brady Bunch." Well, I didn't and nor did most Australians. It is simply a factually wrong statement, and I hate being included with the writer who assumes that I am the same as her. Just tell your story straight. Be factual and drop this fake "you", "we" and "us".

EXCEPT!! There are exceptions. Some magazines such as Cosmopolitan, which publish a lot of advice articles aimed at a particular readership, use a lot of "we" and "you", and that's okay. But don't do it for more mainstream publications.

Reprinted from The Wonderful World of Journalism. Written in the spirit of Simon Townsend's journalism craft advice. Visit simontownsendjournalist.com for the full archive.