

# The Pronoun Rules

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Pronouns are cool. There! I said it. Of course, I only said it on the assumption that no schoolyard bullies would be able to hunt me down and pull my hair, and that the type of person who would read this issue of *Educational Perspectives* might be open to such an idea. But, the truth remains and must be dealt with: Pronouns are cool.

Part of the trick for educators, especially those who look towards imaginative education, is to fix on what turns us on about the materials we teach. No small feat. How often does a well-parsed sentence send shivers up your spine? Most things should stir us, when the underlying human connections are uncovered and dusted off, however imperceptibly. Identifying and elaborating on those stirrings may improve with practice and greatly enrich our teaching and our lives. What does not stir us at all?

This was definitely the case for me with pronouns. For years, I've found them mildly interesting, but I'll be the first one to admit, I'm not picky. However, when it came to teaching pronouns, even I was bored, and most teachers would agree that that constitutes the death knell of any lesson. The masses of pronoun worksheets I generated became the stuff of nightmares for the photocopier and for my colleagues lined up behind me. The pronoun charts I carefully transcribed onto the board and that were in turn faithfully copied down by my students were desiccated versions of what had been living knowledge—language tools developed by humans, for humans. Of course, this is not to say I didn't try various ways of livening up my classroom: various games and group work and funny examples. I strove to communicate how necessary and fundamental pronouns are, and even resorted to their utility for all sorts of standardized tests. But I knew something was amiss, although I couldn't, and wouldn't, given my teaching situation at the time, examine my discomfort too closely.

Instead, I rationalized the discomfort by reminding myself that school is boring, sometimes; there are boring parts of every job, of every life, and students should get used to it. Grammar is dull, it's *meant* to be dull, and that's that. I was doing my job, and not so badly, under the circumstances.

While I've painted a grim picture of the pronoun process, the most insidious belief that I held (I see it clearly in hindsight) is that grammar is *meant* to be dull. Somehow, in my mind, grammar was one of the spawn of Ebenezer Scrooge's joyless attitude and mean spiritedness—meant to keep students numb and teachers employed. The work was no more different than pulling a lever in a factory.

It took the right time and the right context for me to escape from the view that grammar is meant to be boring, and the prejudice that those like me who enjoyed it were somehow mildly eccentric or even masochistic. This imaginative discovery, and others like it, have vastly improved my teaching, and more importantly, they have engaged me profoundly in our shared world.

Pronouns take the place of other nouns. In the case of personal pronouns, they often take the place of nouns that identify persons (hence the term, personal pronoun). Pronouns change form depending on their function in the sentence:

Subject form – *I* touched the dog.

Object form – The dog touched *me*.

Subject AND object form – I touched *myself*. (Sure to excite a giggle), and

Possessive form – That's *my* dog. Or That's *mine*.

In each of these cases, *I*, *me*, *myself*, *my*, and *mine* refer to the same person, even though the terms themselves change form.

But to teach about personal pronouns as I have just done to you not only disengages and chills, it also fails to convey the ingenuity of our language. Our written language finds its roots in long forgotten lists of the number of barrels or the quantity of chickens. Along with the improvements to the technology of writing—pencils, parchment, paper, printing presses—we also see improvements in writing itself: spaces between words, lower case letters, the use of cursive, punctuation, and, among other things, pronouns.

While I am certainly no historian, nor a desert-island alumna, I definitely am an avid reader and movie-watcher, so I'll go ahead and assert that people who are stranded on desert islands with others who speak different languages will start communicating by pointing at concrete objects such as fish, tree, bird, fire, and knife. Eventually they advance to demonstrable actions: eat, sleep, hunt, and run. Then, things fast-forward very quickly, and suddenly everyone is getting along quite well, having built an impregnable fortress from three coconuts and a shoelace.

Somewhere along the line, pronouns come into play for our hypothetical desert islanders and for us, the users of modern languages. But when does it occur? And how? And what difference does it make?

The pronoun is a brilliant abstract concept that gives us the power to get close to, or to draw back from, what we want to describe. Think of the difference between a father telling his child, "I love you," and the same father saying, "Dad loves Child." *I*, *we*, *our*, and *ours* bring us closer to the subject; that's why they are first person pronouns. On the other hand, third person pronouns like *he* and *it* move us farther away, as in parent-teacher-student meetings when we awkwardly describe "her learning progress" to the parent while she herself is sitting right there; the awkwardness forms because the pronoun is meant to hold things at a distance, but in this case, the student in question is sitting two feet away picking her fingernails.

Pronouns also possess the incredible ability to take no proprietary form. They simply represent whatever we want them to represent, and through their various forms, people use them however they want to use them. Bart Simpson of the long-running series *The Simpsons* helps illustrate this feature in an episode in which he finds an automated display promoting fire prevention: The display's recorded voiceover shouts, "Only YOU can prevent forest fires! Only YOU can prevent forest fires!" A quiz at Bart's eye level reads, "Who can prevent forest fires?" followed by two big red buttons: YOU or ME. As the display continues to shout, "Only YOU can prevent forest fires!" Bart presses YOU. "WRONG!" the display roars. "Only YOU can prevent forest fires!"

When I first saw that episode, I laughed, because it struck me as funny. I'm still highly amused even as I type this. But the more I think about it, the more I see its deeper implications, the iceberg below the water level. Pronouns are, in fact, meaningless on their own and only develop meaning to suit the user and to suit the subject's position in the sentence. It makes a big difference to say "*he* walked the big dog" when you really mean "the big dog walked *him*." The pronoun highlights the difference by being formed differently, and by being placed in different spots in the sentences. This remarkable human creation provides clarity without exerting much energy in describing exactly who was walking whom. Somehow, magically, new meaning arises when we change pronouns from one form to another.

Similarly, the computer mouse's on-screen pointer does not exist in any formal sense, except to signify where the mouse in your hand is resting on your mouse pad, which in turn magically signifies a relationship to the content stored on your hard drive. Imagine being without that pointer—What chaos! What inefficiency! Pronouns are no less innovative. While pronouns of course speed things up, especially if your name is Rumpelstiltskin, the conceptual distinction between *she* from *her* is itself pure genius. *She*—the subject, actor, activator. *Her*—the object, recipient, victim. Pronouns point out the differences as they change form, and vary their representational function: the pronoun is the mouse pointer of language.

Now, it is undeniable that at some point, I must impart to students that pronouns represent other nouns and that they can take different forms. I should also convey exactly which forms in precisely which situations. But by framing the material as alive, as living knowledge, I engage students' emotions and affect their learning and retention more efficiently. We should teach that pronouns are products of human genius, with human roots and human purposes. This approach is not only more palatable to students, but more energizing to those of us who have to teach them. And speaking of teaching them, perhaps I should address in more concrete terms how to teach using Kieran Egan's Imaginative Education frameworks that can be found at [www.iereg.net](http://www.iereg.net). In this article, I'll handle personal pronouns within the *romantic* framework with a touch of the *philosophic*; this type of unit aims to encourage students with fairly complete literacy skills to begin forming a more abstract theory of pronouns, of grammar, and of language. The

pedagogical underpinnings of the lesson, specifically the types of cognitive tools utilized and expanded therein, should also make it easier to justify the methodology to parents, students, administrators, and colleagues.

## Finding My Narrative: Heroic Qualities

*What "heroic" qualities or values are central to this topic? What makes the characters in this story full of wonder?*

As previously mentioned, pronouns are cool. However, we've got to narrow the field down. General terms like "cool" or "interesting" don't stir the emotions as deeply as the more specific and powerful ideas "seductive" or "unruly" do. I find personal pronouns *magical*: clever little magicians well practiced in the art of grammatical legerdemain. I hope my students will find them magical, too. They can make us see what they want us to see, whether pulling something close, holding it at a distance, making it walk, or making it be walked all over. The trick for students, then, is to learn to control these magicians, because it's easy to imagine the havoc a disorderly magician can wreak. Given the ongoing Harry Potter mania, the image of a young magician just learning to control his latent powers is one that is familiar to many students.

Alternatively, if one is wary of anthropomorphizing the non-human, the creation and invention of a pronoun system is itself magical: How do people on desert islands figure them out? How did the early language users devise such an ingenious system? The idea that a human construct can be both *nothing* and *anything* boggles my mind and my imagination. Still, I do prefer the anthropomorphizing for two reasons: (1) it more directly links the students to the material, and (2) it requires less preparation time spent in research, and, to my great embarrassment, that matters to me.

## Finding My Narrative: Heroic Images

*What image best captures the heroic qualities of the topic?*

In describing my heroic quality, I'd already stumbled upon my heroic image: a black-clad pale-faced magician with arms outstretched, just moments before she points her wand at something and it suddenly... Well, it could do anything—grow gigantic, shrink from view, turn into a rutabaga, or turn into the man slicing the rutabaga. That breath just before the magician selects her target is my favorite image; at that precise instant, her powers are concentrated on whatever purpose she chooses, and it's up to the learners to steer her powers wherever they want them to go.

## Finding My Narrative: Organizing Content into Story Form

*What "heroic narrative" will allow us to integrate the content we wish to cover?*

Continuing along the vein of little grammatical magicians, the early lessons should focus on the pronoun groupings of first, second, and third person—not only so students can identify voices

on a standardized test, but so that they can understand their essential differences and learn these voices as tools in their own language use. If we want our personal anecdotes to have more power (in other words, to be closer to our hearts), we use the first person; it is almost instinctual, but it still needs to be made explicit. Jay Leno on *The Tonight Show* often makes jokes about invented situations that he claims have happened to him—cooking macaroni, pushing a cart through the supermarket, or walking around a strip mall—situations that might apply more reasonably to his joke-writers than to him. But it certainly is less funny to start, “This weekend joke-writer Lenny was making some macaroni when...” In other words, he uses the first person as a tool to make his stories magical and closer to both him and his listeners.

Without belaboring the point, the second person is how we command or direct operations—the voice of the *Choose Your Own Adventure* series and of countless self-help books. It is yet another magical form, which we can use to address our speech or our writing directly to an audience, and they can feel, in turn, its directness. The third person is the voice of observation, a way to report and watch while standing slightly apart from the action—a simple human innovation that conjures up a subtle distance between speaker and object. To fully learn the role of these voices, students might generate their own mnemonic device for them: I invented the idea of three friends who are invited to my dinner party. The First Person to enter the room, because he came in first, is the garrulous one, the one who walks right up to you and starts chatting as soon as he's throwing his coat on a table. With him it's always “I did this” and “That happened to *me*.” The Second Person comes in after him, nagging him for not hanging his coat up properly—always the director and usually the one focused on people other than himself—“*You* didn't hang your coat” or “Kelly's going to reprimand *you*.” The Third Person is the most reserved. He arrives last. He observes the coat on the table and might have some opinions about it, but he adopts a position of neutrality, especially in comparison to his two friends. He is more likely to think, “*He* never hangs *his* things up” or “*He's* always got something to say about everyone else.” He would be neither so bold nor so weak as to say, “*You* should hang that,” or “Fine, I'll do it,” because those responses are not his style.

Similar examples of each voice happen every day in all contexts. Pronouns are so familiar a part of our lives that it is hard to view them as external linguistic tools. It's easier to say, “It just sounds right.” Pronoun groupings by voice lend themselves to writing exercises such as turning the same neutral information, like a weather report or a sheet of automobile facts, into three different voices and observing the magical effect of such simple changes. Using film also helps to draw the distinction clearly. For example, use a video recording of a professional athlete who talks about himself in the third person (baseball player Ricky Henderson comes to mind), and gather student impressions of such usage.

Continuing with my dysfunctional party guests, the First, Second, and Third Persons, each voice has its own favorite subjects: First Person uses the in-your-face *I* and *We*; Second Person uses the directed address, *You*; and Third Person, the observational *He*,

*She*, *It*, or *They*. These are their favorite subjects, both in terms of what they like to talk about, as well as the subject forms of each voice. The student writer selects from among these subject forms to conjure up the actor, the one who performs the verb, in whatever way the student commands. *He* goes to the jailhouse. *She* walked her cat. *It* can't be stopped. *Who* goes there? *I'll* never tell, so *you'll* never know. If we take a little mental hop over to our magician who is poised with magic wand at hand—Subjectis Dooing! *She* pronounces the spell, “Iwe you, hesheitthey who!”

But let us not sell our black-clad friend short; a magician's tricks are many and her skills certainly don't stop at just doing things. Another of her popular tricks is having things done, or Objectis Receiving, which she initiates through “meus you, him-heritthem whom!” Once cast, this spell will light up the part of the sentence that has received or is receiving the fruits of the verb: The coach favors *us*. The rabid goat chased *her* around the asylum. The recalcitrant B-list actor refused to do *it*, and nobody can blame *him*. Without a subject-object pronoun distinction, our language would suffer from ambiguity: Who is doing the verb? Who is on the receiving end? “It chased it” makes a glimmer of sense only because we know certain things about the first *it* and certain things about the second. We know the two *its* aren't the same thing; otherwise, the sentence would read, “It chased itself.” We assume the first *it* chased the second *it* because we've grown accustomed to a specific English word order. Subjectis Dooing and Objectis Receiving apply even when the pronoun doesn't change. In comparison, “he chased him” is crystal-clear because there is a distinction between the subject and the object.

When it comes time for students to practice these new understandings, I've found nothing as effective as somebody else's really bad writing, full of textual errors that cripple clarity and deaden the magic. Some students can be amazing with worksheets—maybe it's the controlled contexts where a mistake is definitely present and located in a specific place. But instead of using worksheets with contrived sentences with blank lines for students to add their corrections, I use paragraphs written by students in other classes. I also use sentences I've constructed from worksheet sentences, and ones I've invented from scratch. This takes time, but I console myself that I can reuse the examples indefinitely. My paragraphs may possess no errors at all or a rampant abundance of them. I hope to hone my students' *ear* for the language—the ability to notice illogical and unclear language usage—a skill that is more fully developed by context-filled paragraphs than by isolated sentences. I often include a flawless piece to keep my kids on their toes—ah, the howls I get when they realize it contains no errors.

## Developing Cognitive Tools: Exploring Human Strengths & Emotions

*How can students understand the human hopes, fears, passions, or struggles that have shaped our knowledge of this topic?*

My approach in this particular instance is closely connected to the meta-narrative of English as the product of millennia—the story

of language, of human innovation, and of our natural disposition for communication. I seek to impart this wonder and to elevate lessons on the dryness of pronouns or the subjunctive mood or Dickens's *Oliver Twist* by virtue of this meta-narrative. The meta-narrative of English gives life to the history and development of our language and provides a background that invests even subjects like the pronoun with its human dimension.

Debates are another way of engaging students at the emotional level. For example, pronouns can help to trigger discussions about our language's gender divide. Just consider the different uses of gender in pronouns.

## Developing Cognitive Tools: Collecting & Organizing

*What parts of the topic can students best explore in exhaustive detail? How can students present their knowledge in some systematic form?*

Not every language uses the pronoun the way we do; other cultures have found other ways to exercise the same magic. Some languages have no repeating pronouns like the English "you," which can be used in singular and plural cases. In Spanish, distinct words are used. Given the range of languages and cultures in the modern school population, students might enjoy the challenge of looking at the magic of pronouns in some of the world's other languages such as Mandarin, German, Hindi, Japanese, Spanish, Bengali, Portuguese, and Russian. How do other languages achieve the same abilities to move objects closer or farther?

## Looking Forward and Concluding: A Celebratory Ending

*What is the best way of resolving the dramatic tension inherent in the unit? What communal project or activity will enable the students to experience and share this resolution?*

*How can one know whether the topic has been understood, its importance grasped, and the content learned?*

I began this pronoun journey with the image of a pale-faced young magician primed to strike, but what her spell might do was not yet fully spelled out. By this point, however, students should have a much better understanding of what such spells might achieve, and I'd really like to unleash their creativity. My favorite idea is to ask students to create an original physical representation of the pronoun magician: a sculpture, artwork, or computer animation, for example. I hesitate to specify much more, for fear of limiting creativity. These pieces would be displayed in the classroom as vivid reminders of the power of pronouns to do our bidding. As a concluding activity, this would provide a unique access into students' thoughts and ideas about pronouns and their uses.

## A Brief Adieu

I must say that while it did take time to create new ideas about how to teach pronouns, these ideas took no more time to generate than any other well-laid out unit. The paragraph worksheets require extra typing time, but creating a unit exam, evaluating writing samples, and assessing projects and charts are all time expenditures that would occur regardless of how a lesson is taught.

I hope that I have successfully highlighted the enormous untapped potential of humanizing a subject so that it engages students emotionally. It seems impossible to me now that students could be more affected by the dry exposition of pronoun usage than by a vividly colored and enthusiastically rendered tale. The investment in time is well worth the effort.

## REFERENCES

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