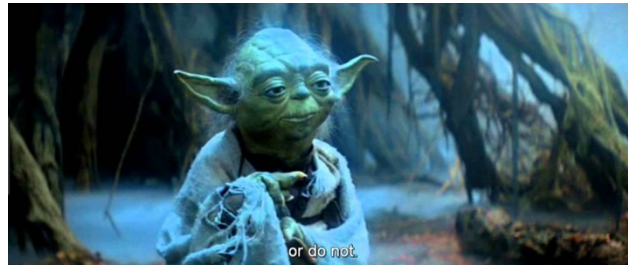## author / actor

To see why I've paired these two words, consider the etymology of the word *author*, taken from etymonline.com:

'from mid-14c. *auctor, autour, autor* "father, creator, one who brings about, one who makes or creates" someone or something, from Old French *auctor, acteor* "author, originator, creator, instigator" (12c., Modern French *auteur*) and directly from Latin *auctor* "promoter, producer, father, progenitor; builder, founder; trustworthy writer, authority; historian; performer, doer; responsible person, teacher," literally "one who causes to grow," agent noun from *auctus*, past participle of *augere* "to increase"'

Notice that older forms of the word *author* contained a *c*, and looked a lot like *actor*. And in fact in earlier times the words were often confused for each other and used interchangeably.

If you study writing, you'll often hear teachers, authors (and other authorities) say, "You have to *find your voice* as a writer." And so students often wonder how they can *find their voice*. I think this is the first step toward an answer to that question: when you're writing, think of yourself as an *author*, and therefore an *actor*—in other words, someone who *acts*. To be an author and an actor, you have to have *self-awareness*—you have to keep in mind that you are a human being who is in the world, doing things, making things, having ideas, and speaking or performing those ideas. If you have strong self-awareness, you also recognize that the world is full of other selves, other beings like you, who are also doing, making, thinking, and speaking. Readers appreciate a sense of self-awareness (or what Aristotle called *ethos*) in an author.

On one hand, you need to be *assertive* and *confident*—you have to say, essentially, "Hey, I'm here, and I have something interesting to show you." On the other hand, you have to know the limits of your knowledge and be *honest* and *direct* about what you don't know.

You could see self-awareness as a psychological mindset that you can "decide" to have—but this is only part of it, because also, for academic writers especially, self-awareness comes largely from the *research* you've done—if you know what others think about your topic, what they have said and written—you'll be better able to form your own independent ideas.

But even if you've done your research, and you have the confidence and the awareness of your limits which an author needs to have—there's still the next step, which is *showing* your self-awareness to your audience, and making them believe in your authority. And this means using

formal techniques in your writing which create the *illusion* of a self-aware author speaking naturally and openly to self-aware readers. I say *illusion*—now, hopefully it's a harmless, subtle, and not too dishonest illusion, which reflects real self-awareness. But it's an illusion nonetheless! Here's where it might help to think of an *actor*—she has to go out on stage, or in front of a camera, and make it look like she is living real life. She has to "act natural." But of course she's using all sorts of formal tricks to do this—makeup, expensive lights, fake tears, painted props, green screens. Writing works the same way—you can't just write down your thoughts exactly as they come to you, and hope to interest and convince people that way. You have to arrange your chaotic thoughts in clearer ways, and use some moves that might seem unnatural in order to give the impression of a "natural" voice.

Here are two guiding rules for creating a sense of self-awareness in your writing:

- It should always be clear what **ideas** are *yours* and what ideas are *other people's*.
- It should always be clear what **words** are *yours* and what words are *other people's*.

Remember Richard Lanham's question, "Who's kicking who?" In other words, Who is the subject of the sentence and what is that subject *doing*? Two variants of this question which are useful for academic writers are, "Who thinks what?" and "Who says what?" One of the big problems I often see in students' writing is that when I read their papers, I can't tell when they are just summarizing others' thoughts, and when they are giving their own opinions or interpretations. Here are two general tips for avoiding that problem:

1. **Use the active voice when you can, name the main subject, use an active verb for the main action, and put the main subject and action near the front of the sentence.**

Here, I'm just summarizing Lanham's advice. Lanham doesn't say *don't* use the passive voice; he just reminds us that it can lead to awkwardness and vagueness, and so we shouldn't use it unless we have a good reason.

So, instead of saying, for example, "It has been shown that confusion can be caused in readers when the passive voice is used," it's better to say, "Lanham shows how using the passive voice can confuse readers." In the revised version, it's now clear that I'm summarizing the ideas of a particular person (Lanham), and it's also clearer what the purpose and main point of Lanham's book is.

Obviously, if your teacher or publisher requires you to use the passive voice, then you'll have to use the passive. And there are times when the passive might be a better stylistic choice (but in my opinion, these times are rare).

2. **Use "I" (or "we") when it makes sense, but don't overdo it.**

Definitely use "I" if you are writing about your own experience in a personal essay. But even in scientific fields, it's usually okay, and often better (in English-language contexts, anyway) to

use personal pronouns when you are describing your project and/or creating a research space for your or others' work ("We recommend that future studies adopt this method...")

On the other hand, hesitant-sounding phrases like "In this paper, I will *try* to show..." or "I'd *like* to say..." are usually unnecessary—if you're the author/actor, then your paper is your stage—act on it! Just state your opinion directly, and give good evidence to prove it. As Master Yoda said, "Do, or do not—there is no try."

Strange and confusing things can happen when writers try to pretend that they are not actors, or when they get so fearful of saying "I" that they deny their own human agency, and give it instead to things that aren't human. Here are a couple examples of this, taken from papers I've seen recently:

"The text chooses the terminology of 'complex edition' because ..."

"This experiment tries to show that disease is spread by..."

"The article confirms this claim. It also advocates the widespread use of technology..."

These sentences are written in the active voice—which is good, right? But we should ask, WHAT is doing the action in each sentence? And is that thing really capable of performing that action? Can a text really *choose* the terminology used in...itself? Can an experiment *try to show* the results...of itself? Can an article *confirm* a claim which is...in itself? No—only a human—only the researcher, or the author—can do these things.

Many academic writing guides refer to this problem as "anthropomorphism" – a big Greek word which means giving human traits to objects or animals. I also sometimes call it "making academic zombie objects." This happens, probably, because the writer wants to say that they themselves did something, or that they made a decision—but they are trying to avoid saying "I" because they were told they shouldn't.

One obvious solution to this problem is to simply use the first person when you are writing about the academic activity of a researcher. For example, in the first example above, the author could simply say:

"I chose the term 'complex edition' because..."

And why shouldn't she say this? It's true! The author *did* make this choice – for very good reasons, which she is about to explain.

But okay, what if the author's supervisor, or the publisher, (irrationally ;) prohibits them from using first person? Then, maybe, passive voice will work. How about this:

"In this text, the term 'complex edition' is used, for the following reasons..."

In this case, I don't say *who* is using this term, but it's implied that I mean the author. This solution may be less elegant than the previous one, but at least I've avoided the main problem—turning the text into a metaphysical being which can choose which words go in it.

How would you rewrite the other two examples above to avoid creating "zombie objects"? Try rewriting each example twice—once using the first person, and again using passive voice.