As an aspiring author of fiction, I know that style is critical, and for those of us who consider ourselves literary fiction writers, style is often paramount. For the most part, we do not write about elves or vampires, bodies found in bathtubs or mutineered nuclear subs. This is not to make a snobbish distinction or to imply that writers such as C. S. Lewis or J. R. R. Tolkien have not produced work worthy of being called literature. The term literary fiction does not usually designate a qualitative distinction but rather functions as the jargon of book promoters to let retailers know in which section of the store a book should be shelved. However, it is safe to say that most creative writing MFA programs focus on literary fiction, filling their students’ heads with hopes of book critic circle and university press awards, for these prizes are almost always given to works of literary fiction rather than to exercises in genre.

However, producing such work can be a burden. For in the absence of ripped bodices and space-borne viruses, what most of us choose to work with is relatively mundane: everyday people and their often pedestrian problems: growing bellies, shrinking love lives, distant fathers, inexplicable apathy. Somehow we have to make such characters fresh, their ennui compelling, their crises sympathetic. Given that most of us eschew real plots almost to the point of pride, style remains our primary resource. Indeed, one of the highest praises that can be given to an author of literary fiction is that he or she writes of ordinary people in extraordinary detail. We want to see rough woolen lives combed until they gently brush our senses like a cashmere blanket.

The importance of style becomes obvious when one reads a critically acclaimed piece of fiction. While book flaps are dedicated to trying to explain often paltry plots or the tenuous connections between a collection of stories, the back covers and inside pages are often dedicated to praising
the author's style. Scanning my bookshelves for some recent favorites yields two quick examples. Author Charles Baxter notes of Tony Earley's *Here We Are in Paradise*: “You can open this book almost anywhere at random and find a beautifully written and compelling paragraph. Tony Earley writes his stories with care, word by word, and sentence by sentence, and they are distinguished by their feeling for the specifics of lives lived in one place, and for their intelligence and for their humor.” *New York Times* critic Michiko Kakutani has this to say about Jhumpa Lahiri’s Pulitzer Prize–winning debut: “A wonderfully distinctive new voice. . . . Ms. Lahiri’s prose is so eloquent and assured that the reader forgets that *Interpreter of Maladies* is a young writer’s first book.” Critics and reviewers expound not on what possible readers can expect to read, but how they will feel while reading it.

“Crafting fiction” is an expression constantly uttered in creative writing workshops, a phrase that calls to mind a fine cabinetmaker whose work is distinguished by precision: measuring, trimming, planing, sanding, polishing. So, too, are we writers to approach our fiction, to smooth the rough edges of our work through meticulous editing. Charles Baxter’s praise of Earley’s work—word by word, sentence by sentence—follows the same metaphor. What emerges from such diligent efforts is really our style, the most important distinction between literary writers. In fact, one could argue that literary fiction, more than anything else, is an exercise in style. About half the writers I’ve met seem to think everything worth saying has already been said and by someone more intelligent. If this is indeed true, then what is literary fiction but an exercise in style? Of course, there are those writers with whom we identify certain themes or settings: Ernest Hemingway’s Spain, John Updike and Richard Ford’s perennial adulterers, Alice Munro’s historical inconoclasts. But certainly their styles are equally identifiable, and I would suggest it is their stylistic mastery rather than their subjects that attracts a loyal audience. Writing is art, and art without style is simply not art.

Readers often ask writers how it is that they begin stories. One would guess that stories begin with a character, an event, or perhaps a specific setting. Sometimes this is true in my own writing. However, what is just as often an impetus is the particular mood I want to evoke. Do I want my readers to confront a hard-hitting first-person narrator, to be lulled by an elegant omniscience, or to savor a small-town chaw? Do I want the hard-boiled immediacy of the present tense or the mandarin voice of the past, seducing its readers with antiquated words? Evoking a particular style or feeling is not only my starting point, but often my goal.
Several years ago, I read Ethan Canin’s novel, *For Kings and Planets*. Though ultimately disappointed in the plot (and again, this now seems a minor flaw), I was positively smitten by its opening paragraph:

Years later, Orno Thatcher would think of his days in New York as a seduction. A seduction and a near miss, a time when his memory of the world around him—the shining stone stairwells, the taxicabs, the sea of nighttime lights—was glinting and of heroic proportion. Like a dream. He had almost been taken away from himself. That was the feeling he had, looking back. Smells and sounds: the roll and thunder of the number 1 train; the wind like a flute through the deck rafters of the Empire State Building; the waft of dope in the halls. Different girls and their lives coming back to him: hallways and slants of light. Daphne and Anne-Marie and Sofia. He remembered meeting Marshall Emerson on his second day at college, at dawn on the curb of 116th Street and Broadway, the air touched with the memory of heat that lingered in the barest rain. It had reminded him of home.

I stopped reading after this passage, put the book down. I reread the passage again, noting all the hallmarks of fine prose: his crisp word choice—shining stone stairwells, the curb of 116th Street and Broadway—then his rhythm, built by several series of details linked by commas or semicolons. There is a lovely cadence to this passage, beginning with a simply stated yet enticing sentence: “Years later, Orno Thatcher would think of his days in New York as a seduction.” Following the rhythmic repetition of the “er” sound, Canin lulls the reader with details, occasionally reminding us again of the scope of the passage with phrases such as “Like a dream,” stroking our imaginations with additional details before packing the final punch, a return to the simple: “It had reminded him of home.” There is both surprise and cohesion in Canin’s juxtaposed imagery: the hypnotic music of the wind like a flute through the deck rafters of the Empire State Building and the hypnotic smell of the waft of dope in the halls. Canin is writing about the seduction of New York City, yet it is his own prose that is the seduction, a whispered promise to the reader of intimacy to follow.

I vowed that someday I would write a passage as finely crafted as this. I yearned to imitate Canin’s sweep and sentiment, and as I struggle to edit my first collection of fiction, I keep in mind how I felt when I read this passage. More than anything else, it is the attempt (at times, I admit, a far cry) to re-create something akin to Canin that has anchored my own efforts. A while back, I hit on the phrase “urban fairytale” and for months
on end, repeated it like a mantra. This summer, while exchanging manuscripts with another writer, I found myself evoking the phrase once again. My main concern for one of the stories was that it feel “beautiful. Like an urban fairytale,” I told him. He nodded and scribbled down a note to himself, and indeed when we met next to discuss our thoughts on the pieces, he pointed out several places where there’s additional room for ethereal possibilities.

Then summer ends. I would like to say that come fall I continually apply the same literary sensitivity in my classroom as I have to my own work in the months before. But I must make a confession. I am often guilty of sidelining style, relegating it to a quick cameo appearance in the classroom. So often as an instructor, I downplay issues of style as if matters of point of view, for example, were a concern only for the more technically adept, as if my students just wouldn’t understand or appreciate such discussions. I assign beautifully tailored pieces only to assume that my students lack the ability to re-create such quality. I tell them that in the best works, content and structure and style are not distinct elements but rather an integrated whole. Yet I rarely ask them to aim for this synthesis in their own work. I think we have to get down to the basics—grammar, paragraph organization, the almighty thesis. By the third week of August, issues of style seem to inhabit a distant universe. I become the ultimate hypocrite.

But I fear I am not alone. I fear many of my fellow teachers do the same. If they could just produce a competent argument, we bemoan over beers, then complain how we have to read seventy-five papers that could be titled “Why Women Need Equal Rights but Not Feminism.” As one teacher friend recently said, “Style? Who has time for style? My students can’t write a complete sentence.” Our litanies intone the same words over and over again: competency, argument, logic, fallacy, evidence, Evidence, EVIDENCE. The same words we would hope to see applied to our own work—lyrical, dramatic, suspenseful—disappear from our vocabulary. It’s as if style has become an extra feature like power windows rather than part of the basic model. The problem? Absolute hypocrisy. We leave students to grasp instinctually what we have painstakingly honed since we left our graduate programs: a style worthy of notice.

One can chalk such attitudes up to snubbing or poor teaching. But one cannot just point fingers at burned-out instructors. Avoiding teaching style is not just a matter of a bad attitude. Some of us, I know, are aching to devote more time to rhythm, metaphor, and detail but question
whether such intense focus on style is in keeping with the aims of our course. Despite numerous discussions at faculty meetings, I continue to find myself asking just what kind of writing am I supposed to be teaching in freshman comp? And particularly for those programs with exit exams: can we take the chance that the evocative, detailed narrative will not be considered in keeping with departmental standards? Or that, as I have heard some say, it is not even an essay at all? If the operating words are argumentation and logic, then we should not be surprised when stylistic considerations become afterthoughts. On the other hand, if the operating words are persuasion and suggestion, then style matters. I suspect that my department is not alone in having somewhat ambiguous objectives. One could argue that it is precisely such ambiguity that allows teachers a certain freedom. However, when it is not evident that such latitude is acceptable, we should not be surprised when newer, untenured faculty fail to devote time to explore style. Not only do the students miss out, but so do the instructors. MFA’s like myself, who are increasingly teaching university composition courses to make a living, are trained in style. Should we be teaching without capitalizing on our expertise? Promotion and tenure committees themselves may also send a message that style is not as important as other factors. Among faculty publications, most university promotion committees tend to weigh research and argumentative papers more heavily than creative or reflective pieces. Though unintentional, slighting style is endemic to the way most colleges operate.

I’ve begun to address this problem in my classroom. During the third segment of the semester, we take a break from studying the formal features of argument to examine what are essentially narratives. It is not that the texts are not essays. They contain a thesis, evidence, development. It is that they, as I tell my students, persuade rather than argue. Thematically, the series of readings focuses on outsiders or ethnic and socioeconomic difference. We read several essays by minority writers, writers who are marginalized not only within the dominant Anglo culture, but often within their own communities as well. Joan Nestle’s “A Restricted Country,” for instance, recounts her family’s first trip together. Joan, a teenage Jew from the Bronx and longtime dreamer of the Wild West, joins her older brother and single, working-class mother on a trip to a western dude ranch in Arizona only to discover anti-Semitism from gentiles and class snobbery among wealthy Jews. In “Complexion,” Richard Rodriguez, a native of California’s Central Valley, examines his childhood anxieties. Rodriguez describes the double bind he faced growing up as a Mexican
American male: the dark skin that his female relatives found unattractive and the interest in literature that his male relatives found unmacho. The third essay, Brent Staples’s “Black Men and Public Space,” describes how Staples, as a large African American male, has met with suspicion, fear, and even physical threats when he walks on city streets.

However, after teaching these particular essays my discussions tend to be less about politics than about poetics. These essays are ripe with compelling stylistic choices. They provide ample context for addressing rhythm, detail sequencing, metaphor, and point of view, the same kinds of issues that short story writers and novelists routinely face when producing their own work.

At the end of the segment, students are given a choice to write either an analytical paper about the author’s stylistic choices or a creative narrative based on the structures provided by Brent Staples or Joan Nestle. Not surprisingly, almost all of the students choose the latter. Staples’s organization is fairly straightforward: hook, thesis, examples, background, more examples, stakes and consequences, solution. Nestle, in contrast, divides her essays into a set of scenes, each with its own minithesis or epiphany. Staples’s essay offers a macroview in describing incidents that span his life; Nestle delivers a microview, instead focusing on one week of her adolescence. Though both essays are about identity, Staples’s work aims to prove a social phenomenon exists, Nestle’s to trace one case of personal development. Once the students have selected the format they think will best explain their experience, the usually tough tasks of structure and content are largely resolved and the students are freer to devote themselves to stylistic considerations.

The students seem to respond to these essays more than most. Perhaps this is because we as readers tend to respond in kind when writers expose their vulnerabilities. Perhaps it is because so many of my students have just narrowly escaped the pit of adolescence and are still raw with memories of social ostracism. Or it could also be that students, although not necessarily able to articulate their reasons, recognize powerful prose when they read it.

Flannery O’Connor once noted that she strove to distill the essence of the story in its opening sentence. Nestle, Rodriguez, and Staples have followed suit. Here is Joan Nestle’s: “When the plane landed on the blazing tar strip, I knew Arizona was a new world.” Rodriguez begins like this: “Complexion. My first conscious experience of sexual excitement concerns my complexion.” Staples chooses to play with his reader,
masquerading as a criminal: “My first victim was a woman—white, well dressed, probably in her early twenties.” In doing so, he underscored the essay’s major theme: the stereotyping of black men. These first lines serve as a segue into discussing how content and style can mesh, how the strongest of hooks not only pique the reader’s attention but also underscore an essay’s major point.

My students tend to call these pieces stories and though I am quick to point out that they are in fact essays, my students are right in that these texts employ the same literary sensitivities as fiction. It is interesting that all three authors chose to begin in-scene—that is, with an action set in a particular time and place. All fiction writers know that the first few lines of a story should not only ground the reader but also set the tone for what follows. Given the importance of synthesizing description and mood, the ordering of details can be tricky territory. If given six critical details, how do we, as writers, decide what should go first or second or third?

Sometimes sequencing is a matter of logic. Others would argue that this is largely an issue of content. It is content but only to a certain degree, especially when one is dealing with the first paragraphs of a paper. Fiction writers agonize over their opening paragraphs, and agents and editors often suggest cutting the author’s original paragraphs, integrating that information later and starting the work a few paragraphs down. So it’s not just a matter of content. It’s a matter of style, of establishing mood and pacing. What are the details that will introduce not only the subject or plot, but the author’s tone? What are the observations that will, as Ethan Canin does, seduce the reader? I would argue that any ordering calculated to create a certain effect on the reader is more a question of style than content or structure.

Nestle, for instance, chooses to end her opening paragraph like this: “The desert air hit us with its startling clarity: this was not the intimate heat of New York, the heat that penetrated our flesh and transformed itself into our sweat and earned our curses.” When questioned why Nestle might choose to begin her piece with an observation about the air, my students are quick to respond. As veterans of the narcotic heat of New Orleans summers, they understand why Nestle quickly moves to describing the Arizona air. Nestle’s choice also makes sense logically: air is immediate, our most fundamental environment. Novelists are prone to beginning with stunning visual images that suggest the central theme of the book. And this image, my students point out, is also symbolic. Air is life. The classroom discussion then turns to what Nestle’s observation
portends for the rest of the essay, specifically the fate of this family, how different air suggests foreignness, even a sense of danger.

Nestle is following the old fiction adage “show, don’t tell.” Of course, all fiction occasionally does tell, but not without having earned the right through description that resonates with meaning and metaphor that foreshadows larger themes. Typical first-year student compositions that have argument as their sole purpose tend to do a lot of telling. Suggesting is a considerably more difficult task. Again, Nestle’s essay offers another metaphor for classroom discussion. After Nestle’s mother publicly embarrasses herself by trying to ride a horse, the teenage Nestle finds her mother on the outskirts of the dude ranch: “She was sitting on a child’s swing, trailing one leg in the dust. A small round woman whose belly bulged in her too-tight, too-cheap pants.” Several sentences later, Nestle does tell us that “Arizona was not for Regina Nestle,” but only after letting her reader chew on the metaphor of powerlessness suggested by the swing, the role reversal of mother and daughter that portends Nestle’s coming-of-age. Classroom discussion can also address the word choice of “too” and how this small word suggests the daughter’s judgment in a way that “very” tight and “very” cheap cannot. Nestle’s final line suggests a growing distance between the mother and daughter: “While I scrambled over this new brown earth, my mother sat in the desert, a silent exile.”

Of course, there is always the question of what the students actually retain and even beyond that, what they will apply to their own writing. Fortunately, the students’ papers have yielded some pleasant surprises. The image of Nestle’s mother on the swing and all its unempowering implications of powerlessness stuck with one student as she wrote her narrative. This student explored the same helplessness and exile in her own narrative about being the only single young mother at her daughter’s preschool holiday show. Here Nestle’s metaphorical swing is replaced by a small plastic chair:

I take a seat next to Haylee in one of the miniature chairs. It is cold and I am the only adult sitting down; the rest stand joined in conversation. We wait for the teacher to arrive to give us the program. As we wait, the school director comes in and suggests that we each say our name. I begin to think of a way to get out of saying my name. No such luck! It is now my turn and all eyes are on me. Their stares burn like hot lasers. In my eyes, I am just like any other parent, but to them I am merely a child myself. When I speak my head is hung low and I am nearly whispering. The rest of the parents continue their conversations.
I want nothing more than for them to include me, but instead I sit there all alone in the miniature chair.

A paragraph later, Nestle’s essay once again provides an opportunity for students to analyze ordering of detail as she describes the individual motivations for her family’s trip out west:

I had dreamed horses all my sixteen years, played wild stallion in the Bronx vacant lots that were my childhood fields, had read every book about wild horses, mustangs, rangy colts that I could find, and through all the splintering agonies of my family I galloped on plains that were smooth and never ending. For my brother, who had seldom been with my mother and me, this trip was both a reunion and an offering. After years of turmoil, mistakes and rage, he was giving us the spoils of his manhood. He lay this vacation at the feet of our fatherless family as if it were a long awaited homecoming gift. For my mother, it was a simple thing: her week’s vacation from the office, her first trip in over twenty years.

In fiction, we might call this backstory. Nestle is supremely efficient, sketching three characters in five sentences. But Nestle’s description also sets forth stakes and consequences, letting readers know from the onset all that is riding on this family trip: style and structure merge. In terms of its structure or ordering of detail, students are able to witness the progression from the least intense to the most dramatic. As we move from Nestle’s fantasy to her brother’s regret to her mother’s subjugation, we understand there is an increasing set of stakes. Reading this passage out loud, students can also hear how rhythm itself packs the final punch. Joan’s sketch of herself is like a wild horse, unbridled and roaming. With her brother, she begins to pull in the reins, paying more attention to the conventional constraints of length and grammar. And her mother’s portrait, with its ironic use of “simple” juxtaposed with her own romanticized description, makes Nestle’s last line—the plainest and shortest of all—the most devastating.

An ESL student, originally from Cyprus, chose to model his essay structure on Nestle. He saw similarities with his story, an analysis of his postapartheid return to South Africa where he had spent most of his childhood. This student wanted to set his first scene, as Nestle had done, with his airplane touching down. He also had considerable backstory to incorporate, which, like Nestle, would offer his readers a set of stakes for the trip. We went through multiple drafts, rearranging and tightening.
The primary challenge was how to establish a tone that felt true to his experience. After several tries, he managed to order the details so as to build intensity. Lyrical descriptions and metaphors were for the most part cut in order to mimic the blunt, rapid-fire tension of South Africa’s civil strife. Here is the first paragraph of his final draft:

I could not believe that I was on the plane returning to South Africa. We had left the country like criminals on the run after all our efforts to stay failed. The South Africans had demanded to take their role as a majority in their country. Immigrants, like us, were to be thrown out with the minority and the monarchs. Natives robbed our new house, right after my mother had finished redecorating. They not only robbed our store twice, but threatened to take the life of my father and his employees. Nothing was impossible at that time, especially after all the punishment that native Africans had suffered for so many years. When my uncle was killed in front of my sister’s eyes, the glass overflowed; my parents took us and left.

Note how this student mimicked Nestle’s final punch, a simple statement of the paragraph’s most dramatic details: his uncle’s murder and his family’s fleeing.

Nestle, Rodriguez, and Staples have all written first-person essays. The “I” narrative indeed becomes the camera “eye” panning around the setting, grounding the reader in time and place. Staples and Nestle and to some degree Rodriguez’s piece provide forays into classroom discussions of point of view and how this seemingly small stylistic choice has huge repercussions for the meaning and mood of the text. In my own writing and in previous writing groups, one of the most frequently asked questions is “Should this story be in the third or in the first person?” One does not have to be a fiction writer to know that a story in which every thought or action is personalized with an “I” creates a more personal, immediate effect than one filled with he’s or she’s. “I” narratives can be tricky, even manipulative. At least since *Catcher in the Rye*, no first-person narrator can ever be trusted completely again. In my own work, I rarely use “I” narrators. This is because first-person narrators are hard to contain. When I do employ the first person it is to portray characters who cannot articulate their aspirations, their fears, their needs with the clarity that a third-person narrator could. For me, the “I” protagonist, like Holden Caulfield, is the mark of confusion. Likewise, Rodriguez, Nestle, and Staples’s first-person narrators are appropriate not only because they write of personal experiences but also because they cast themselves as
developing characters: dynamic, unfixed, at times confused. Each of the
pieces ends with a bittersweet moment that reveals that none of these
authors has completely come to clear-cut resolution about his or her
experiences as an outsider. In this way, point of view is a stylistic device; it
also suggests meaning. Once again, a stylistic choice reinforces content.
“I” narrators are almost always illogical, often the antithesis of the voice
of argumentative essay.

However, students have not necessarily been trained to understand
point of view as a choice they make as writers. Most students see the pro-
noun “I” as an indicator only—in other words, the pronoun that indicates
not “you,” not “they,” not “he.” They have not been trained to see it as
a designation that holds considerable interpretative value. Some of my
students have even been taught that the “I” is inappropriate for classroom
ejays. Nestle, Rodriguez, and Staples offer evidence that the first person
can be appropriate. In these pieces, as in all pieces that examine identity,
this single letter is a loaded word. “I” can signify positive connotations
of agency, autonomy, or self-realization. It can also suggest negative con-
notations: alienation, separation, rejection, as in Nestle’s epiphany at a
“gentile only” dude ranch: “Finally, I found what I knew had to be there:
a finely bound volume of Mein Kampf. For one moment, it wasn’t 1956,
but another time, a time of flaming torches and forced marches. It wasn’t
just my Jewishness that I learned at that moment: it was also the stunning
reality of exclusion unto death.” The value of the first person can shift
within a piece—at times indicating a clear sense of self-definition, other
times self-loathing or frustration.

The first person plural, “we,” can likewise demonstrate unity and
belonging. However, its absence can be even more telling. Though
Staples titles his essay “Black Men and Public Space,” and though he sug-
gests that all African American males face similar stereotyping, he never
refers to himself as part of a larger “we.” Staples refers to himself only in
the first person singular. When students are pressed to explain what could
be seen as a discrepancy, they conclude that Staples wants to be recog-
nized an as individual, not just as a black male, and that to use the plural
instead of the singular would go against the spirit of his thesis. Likewise,
though “Complexion” focuses on Rodriguez’s family, normally a very “we”
type of unit, Rodriguez never refers to his family in the first person plu-
ral. In this case, the “I” resonates strongly, for even in the presence of his
parents, Rodriguez is alone: too dark for his mother’s tastes, too soft for
his father’s. The only time Rodriguez uses “we” is in reference to his circle
of awkward comrades at school, whose bodies, he notes, were “too short or too tall, all graceless and all—except mine—pale.” I think many of my students understand what it feels like to fall short of parental expectation, and given our discussion about “I,” they quickly deduce the significance of Rodriguez’s omitted “we.”

In an analytical paper about point of view and identity, one student explained what he saw as the links between Rodriguez’s self-appraisals and his choice of pronouns:

In “Complexion” Rodriguez also writes his essay in the first person singular, but unlike Nestle, he does not refer to his family as “we.” This shows how much his family has affected him because he does not even view himself as part of his family. Rodriguez gives many examples of how he views himself. All of them were negative feelings due to his complexion and personality differences. Rodriguez explains why he feels separated, such as his interest in literature, his lack of socialization, and his inability to be “man” enough. Rodriguez does identify with a group of outsiders, his friends. This is when he switches to the “we” perspective . . . because they seem to go through the same experiences he is going through. They all have felt the loneliness and shame they have brought to the world.

Another student also chose to write an analytical paper on point of view and identity. In rereading “A Restricted Country,” Ronielle focused on each pronoun reference and discovered that there was an almost exact correlation between Nestle’s pronoun choice and her evolution as a character. At the beginning of the section, this student admitted she didn’t know what point of view even meant. Yet the final version of her paper reveals a close, expert reading of Nestle’s shifting pronouns and how each change signals a new step in the development of the author’s identity. She notes not only Nestle’s pronoun choices, but what Nestle chose not to include:

Nestle begins her story by using the word “I” to describe the scenery. She uses the “I” to describe her thoughts but uses “we” to describe her family. Nestle remarks, “We were Jewish, but we were different” after she notices class differences between the Jewish people on the ranch and her mother. Nestle’s mother “dressed wrong” and she could not keep up with the rich Jewish people. At this point Nestle claims to be part of the difference, but she changes her pov [point of view] again when she is embarrassed by her mother’s differences. The other guests laugh at her mother as she tries to ride a horse in a “checked polyester suit.” Nestle distances herself from her mother by referring to her as a “she” rather than a “we” and removes her from the story by never bringing her name
up again nor by ever using “we” to describe her own family again. She is also an adolescent daughter trying to form an independent identity from her family. This breaks up her family unit and Nestle is alone.

The word “I” returns the night she makes out in a car with an older worker on the ranch named Bill. Nestle does not use “we” to refer to herself and Bill, thus showing that this is not a serious relationship. She uses “I” to express that she is identifying only with herself and is no longer part of a group. Nestle matures throughout the story and we find her changing her pov again in the last few paragraphs. A relationship is discovered between Elizabeth, another guest at the ranch, and Bill. In the end, Nestle is riding through the pastures with her brother Elliot, Elizabeth and Bill. They are enjoying the afternoon together and the land in which they are riding. She no longer refers to herself as “I” and says, “We had come down from the mountain on a different path.” Nestle is part of a new family and is no longer on her own.

An awareness of the connection between point of view and identity also found its way into several creative pieces in which students examined their own struggles with difference. For instance, one student chose to end her narrative with a play on point of view. In this case, the switch from the first person singular “I” to the plural “we” suggested a positive development. For this student, who traced her experiences as a young boot camp trainee. The loss of her “I,” which until this point had been synonymous with selfishness and lack of direction, was replaced by the “we” of solidarity and discipline. On graduation day, the student suggests that part of her honor is in being promoted to a “we,” a contributing member of her battalion and new family: “The battalion walks onto the field, heads held high, shoulders squared. The many “I”s that arrived eight weeks earlier have become one. Members of a family that spans gender, religion and color, we are brothers and sisters. We bleed Army green.”

In my own education, the significance of pronoun choice was never discussed until upper-level literature classes. Yet, if we ask our students to include themselves in their work, which most of my colleagues seem to find rewarding, then perhaps discussions like these are very much to the point in basic composition classes. When students go to write their own narrative essays, they should be conscious of what their “I” signifies at any given point in the work. Nor should we as faculty create oceans between the studying of great works of literature and encouraging the writing of works that demonstrate various forms of literary sensitivity.

Composition is not simply about winning arguments or understanding logic. The term is used in music and in painting, the expressive result of
an artist’s study. Likewise, as instructors of written composition, we must also find a place for the more ambitious goal of evoking experience and suggesting meaning, not through some unguided student exploration but from rigorous attention to literary devices. As readers and graders, it may prove difficult to break our molds and to acknowledge that some issues have no clear resolution and to recognize the inability to come to a conclusion as not necessarily the mark of incompetent argument but, in some cases, the only possible result of honest intellectual pursuit. We, who are teachers and have often lived longer than our students, know that truth does not stem from firmness of opinion but from the exploration of subtle differences. Literature has long navigated such grey waters. Unfortunately, many of us continue to point to it as if it were a distant ship on the horizon rather than an immediate means of conveyance. Meanwhile, many of our students tread water in its wake.