Narrative Shift Error

A Narrative Shift Error is quite easy to identify and correct. Every paragraph and every essay reflects a voice, particularly a narrative voice. Here, the term “narrative” stands for the narrator of the paragraph or essay. The narrator is simply the author of the paragraph or essay. As the narrator of the paragraph or essay, the author must be consistent with his or her narrative voice. Perhaps an easier way to think about an author’s narrative voice is to think of it in terms of a point-of-view. For a narrator, there are 3 types of point-of-view: 1st person point-of-view (e.g. I, we), 2nd person point-of-view (you), and 3rd person point-of-view (he, she, it, they). If the author shifts between different types of point of view, then the resulting error is a Narrative Shift Error. Here’s an example:

-“Most people don’t seem to care much about reading and writing. Perhaps it is because they feel that reading and writing skills are in some ways impractical. I, however, feel that this common misjudgment of reading and writing skills as impractical is itself impractical. If you can’t read or write well, then how can you expect to succeed in the job market and in the real world?”

Notice how in that small paragraph the narrator shifts from 3rd person point-of-view to 1st person point-of-view to 2nd person point-of-view? The solution to a Narrative Shift Error is simple—be as consistent as possible with your point-of-view, whether your point-of-view is 1st person, 2nd person, or 3rd person. Now let’s look over the revised version of the paragraph that’s consistent in narrative voice:

-“Most people don’t seem to care much about reading and writing. Perhaps it is because they feel that reading and writing skills are in some ways impractical. This common misjudgment of reading and writing skills as impractical, however, is itself impractical. If a person can’t read or write well, then how can he or she expect to succeed in the job market and in the real world?”

This revised version is consistent in narrative voice—it sticks to the 3rd person point of view.

Remember—always be consistent with your narrative point of view.