Editing Exercise #2 on Cohesion—due Monday, September 16

We have discussed various methods for achieving cohesion in writing, in particular the known-new contract that exists between the writer and reader. Here are various methods writers use to maintain this contract with their readers:

1. Repetition of key words (not redundancy)
2. Use of synonyms for key words
3. Use of personal pronouns
4. Use of demonstrative pronouns (this, these, those) and indefinite pronouns (other, another, some other)
5. Use of passive voice to move known information to the front of the sentence
6. Use of introductory adverbials (prepositional phrases, participles, infinitives, subordinate clauses) to begin a sentence with known information
7. Use of parallelism

Answer the following questions using the attached article, the one entitled “We” that comes from Ben Zimmer’s “On Language” column in the October 1, 2010, New York Times Magazine. The article is also copied below.

1. Paragraphs two and three start in similar fashion. Which of the seven cohesive devices listed above does Zimmer use to tie these paragraphs to the known information that has gone before?

2. Write the two sentences from paragraph three that use passive voice. How does the passive voice serve to maintain the known-new contract in paragraph three?

3. In paragraph five, Zimmer uses three synonyms for a key concept. What are the three synonyms?

4. What other word is repeated in paragraph five to maintain cohesion?

5. Write out the sentence from paragraph five that uses passive voice. How does that use of passive voice serve to maintain the known-new contract in paragraph five?

6. Write out two sentences where demonstrative pronouns were used to maintain cohesion.
7. Write out two sentences where indefinite pronouns were used to maintain cohesion.

8. Write out two sentences from paragraph nine in which an introductory adverbial is used. Explain how moving the adverbial to the beginning of the sentence helped maintain the known-new contract.

9. Write the sentence from paragraph nine that uses passive voice. How does the passive voice serve to maintain the known-new contract in paragraph nine?

10. What strategy does the first sentence of paragraph eight use to connect to the previous paragraph?

11. What word is repeated in paragraph eight to maintain cohesion?

12. What strategy does the first sentence of paragraph nine use to connect to the previous paragraph?

13. What strategy does the first sentence of paragraph ten use to connect to the previous paragraph?

14. What strategy does the first sentence of paragraph seven use to connect to the previous paragraph?

15. Note how seldom overt transition words (such as however, therefore, first of all) are used in this article. Write out two sentences that do use such overt transition words.
Theodore Rockwell, who served as technical director for the U.S. Navy’s nuclear-propulsion program in the 1950s and ’60s, shared a telling anecdote about his onetime boss, the famously irascible Adm. Hyman G. Rickover. “One time he caught me using the editorial we, as in ‘we will get back to you by . . .’ ” Rockwell recalled in his memoir, “The Rickover Effect.” “He explained brusquely that only three types of individual were entitled to such usage: The head of a sovereign state, a schizophrenic and a pregnant woman. Which are you, Rockwell?’”

Rickover was hardly alone in his abhorrence of the editorial we — so called because of its usage by anonymous opinion columnists. In fact, his barb has been told in many different ways over the years. Consider another volatile personality, Roscoe Conkling, who served as senator from New York after the Civil War. In 1877, Conkling objected to how the new president, Rutherford B. Hayes, overused the word we, and The St. Louis Globe-Democrat reported his rejoinder: “Yes, I have noticed there are three classes of people who always say ‘we’ instead of ‘I.’ They are emperors, editors and men with a tapeworm.”

Conkling’s formulation was picked up by we-haters far and wide. The trifecta of “kings, editors and people with tapeworm” has been widely attributed to Mark Twain, but like so many witticisms credited to him, there’s no record he ever said it. It’s also unlikely that Henry David Thoreau ever made the remark once ascribed to him: “We is used by royalty, editors, pregnant women and people who eat worms.”

Worms, or more specifically tapeworms, figure prominently in we-related humor. The earliest known joke to combine parasites and pronouns comes from George Horatio Derby, a humorist from California who assumed the pen name John Phoenix. “I do not think I have a tapeworm,” he wrote in 1855, “therefore I have no claim whatever to call myself ‘we,’ and I shall by no means fall into that editorial absurdity.”

What is it about the presumptuous use of we that inspires so much outrage, facetious or otherwise? The roots of these adverse reactions lie in the haughtiness of the majestic plural, or royal we, shared by languages of Western Europe since the days of ancient Roman emperors. British sovereigns have historically referred to themselves in the plural, but by the time of Queen Victoria, it was already a figure of fun. Victoria, of course, is remembered for the chilly line, “We are not amused” — her reaction, according to Sir Arthur Helps, the clerk of the privy council, to his telling of a joke to the ladies in waiting at a royal dinner party. Margaret Thatcher invited mocking Victorian comparisons when she announced in 1989, “We have become a grandmother.”
Nameless authors of editorials may find the pronoun *we* handy for representing the voice of collective wisdom, but their word choice opens them up to charges of gutlessness and self-importance. As the fiery preacher Thomas De Witt Talmage wrote in 1875: “They who go skulking about under the editorial ‘we,’ unwilling to acknowledge their identity, are more fit for Delaware whipping-posts than the position of public educators.”

Given the accumulated resentment of “nosism” (using *we* for *I*, from the Latin pronoun *nos*), it’s little wonder that modern literary writers have rarely tried to write narratives in the first-person plural. But the device of collective narration has worked effectively on occasion, from William Faulkner’s “Rose for Emily” to Joshua Ferris’s “Then We Came to the End.” Most recently, Lisa Birnbach has taken the nosist route in “True Prep,” her 30-year follow-up to “The Official Preppy Handbook.” (Opening lines: “Wake up, Muffy, we’re back. O.K., now where were we?”)

The royal and editorial *we* are examples of the exclusive *we*, meaning that the person being addressed is not included in the scope of the pronoun. English, like many languages, uses the same word for the inclusive first-person plural, encompassing the notional “you” along with “me.” The inclusive *we* seeks out a bond of empathy or common understanding between the speaker and the receiver of a message. Writers rely on it to establish rapport with readers, and teachers with students (“as we shall see”). But this is not always a welcome rhetorical move, especially when it comes across as pedantic or condescending. At worst, it can recall the *we* of caregivers for the very young and very old: “How are we feeling today?”

The overreaching effect of the inclusive *we* has sparked its own humorous traditions. In August 1956, the Los Angeles Times columnist Gene Sherman introduced into print what was already a well-traveled story about the Lone Ranger and his faithful sidekick, Tonto. Surrounded by “wild, screaming Indians,” the Lone Ranger desperately asks Tonto, “What will we do?” Tonto replies, “What do you mean ‘we,’ paleface?” Later versions changed “paleface” to “white man” or “kemo sabe,” Tonto’s endearing epithet for the Ranger. The joke is so well known in the United States that just the punch line is usually sufficient for rebuffing an overly inclusive *we*.

An equally colorful but less common American retort to the inclusive first-person plural pronoun is “We? You got a mouse in your pocket?” Curt Johnson, publisher of the Chicago literary magazine December, remarked in a 1966 article that he heard the line from a student talking back to a college instructor. Many other regional variants have sprung up, with “rat” or “frog” standing in for “mouse.” Another more sex-specific inquiry is about “a mouse in your purse.” Dabblers in nosism beware: whether it’s tapeworms or rodents, saying *we* where *I* would do can expose you to accusations of infestation.