

POINT OF VIEW

Hello! I am Jenifer Rowe, and **I'm excited** to be here to talk with you about some of the things you want to consider when you're deciding which point of view to use in telling your story.

A little about me: I am an officer on the Board of Directors of the California Writers Club – Sacramento branch, as are many of the other speakers at this conference. We're a very active club, and in each of your bags you will find our Membership Application form. I point this out because printed on the form is our website address, www.CWCsacramentowriters.org. I do not have paper handouts of my slides, but I will be posting them on our website on the Meeting Archive tab.

Point of View (or POV) is a huge consideration, and one that I struggled with in writing my first novel, *Unexpected Findings*, which I published last year. The story opens with a 13-year-old runaway foster girl, and I first wondered whether it was a Young Adult novel, which is often - but not always - written in first person.

But as I wrote, I realized that there was a **second protagonist who could not have been more different** than that young girl, and I wanted him to tell his story as well. I basically wanted to be in both of their heads and no one else's. I wanted to take turns seeing the situation from first the eyes of one and then the eyes of the other, but **I didn't want either of them to know the whole truth**. I'll let you know later on how I worked that out.

Slide 1

From my first slide, you can see that I often think about POV the way I've been taught to conjugate verbs in Spanish, French and German. There are only a limited number of possibilities (thank goodness!) as to who is telling the story, but you'd better stick to the proper forms for each, or the readers will wince at your language gaffes. Your audience will spot when someone in your story knows or feels something they shouldn't be able to do, and they will be left confused.

So onward to **First Person POV**.

Slide 2

We are looking through one person's eyes. But who is this person, and why should we believe him or her? And at least as important - do we care about them? A reader should be invested in this person, because in this case the narrator is a character in the story. If not, why bother including them?

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First Person

- Limited in scope and timeframe, at least if the narrator is mortal
 - Story is happening as the voice tells it, so it mostly rules out flashbacks or backstory
- The voice carries credibility, because ostensibly they saw it with their own eyes
- It can work in mysteries, where the reader knows only what "I" see (but "I" probably knows the solution or wouldn't be telling the tale)
- The narrator must keep the same voice throughout and stay in character.
 - For example, if the narrator is speaking in dialect, don't suddenly have them lapse into a flat newscaster's voice, or switch to formal English. That breaks character.
- The use of present tense can create even more immediacy (for example, "I walk into the room and the dog runs at me snarling.")

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- **Reminiscence:** “I” voice is telling what happened long ago to an earlier “I”. (*City of Thieves*, by David Benioff, is a double-I: in the first chapter, the grandson is asking the grandfather for a story about WWII, and then the grandfather is relating a tale about himself as a young man, then the grandson comes back to the present moment at the end.)
 - The past “I” can be contrasted with the present “I”, showing character growth. **City of Thieves is a beautiful example of an “I” narrator revealing his own character arc – how the youthful self changed as a result of the war experience.**
- An **older use** of First Person is found in books written as: a series of letters, emails, diary entries, or memoir. This is the **epistolary** method, and it *can* lack freshness and vitality, and a sense of bonding with the characters.
- It’s also possible to use two or more “I” voices to tell the same tale in different ways
 - Alternate by chapter (*Gone Girl*, by Gillian Flynn)
 - Distinct sections of the book
 - *The Dovekeepers*, by Alice Hoffman, about the siege of Masada in ancient Judea. It is divided into four distinct narratives voiced by four different women.
 - *Mudbound*, by Hillary Jordan, divides the accounts by chapter, such that it takes a couple of paragraphs to realize who’s talking, but she does it very artfully.
- The narrator “I” must be as important to the story as any other character, or why bother with him/her? (In *The Book Thief*, by Markus Zusak, the narrator is Death. But Death is not omniscient – which we’ll get to later – and so he has to play an active role, moving around in time and space.)

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- In some cases, First Person can diminishes suspense (because obviously, “I” lives to tell the tale, **unless** the narrator is a ghost, which has been used.)
- It makes self-aggrandizement difficult (it’s awkward to say “I” was brave, beautiful, clever, etc.) so it makes it harder to describe the narrator’s character.
- Other characters can only be revealed through their words and actions. We don’t know anyone’s thoughts or motivations, other than what they show us.
- Writers may have difficulty getting plot information to their narrator. There has to be a plausible mechanism for the narrator to come by his or her knowledge. And here the writer has to watch out for cliches or magical solutions (unless you’re writing a magical story!)
 - Think about Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. It always amazed and surprised me how Sherlock Holmes discovered key facts, but it was always explained and always believable,
- And finally, it can be tricky to describe the narrator in terms of name, age, gender, ethnicity, physical build, etc.

Slide 6

“Only the very brave and experimental should attempt to write a complete novel in the second person...” – David Hewson

Slide 7

Second Person

- It is definitely more experimental. You are inviting the reader to become a part of the story. Think of it almost as a disembodied voice inside the reader's head.
- There's a sense of immediacy, as though the reader was walking along inside the plot with things happening to him or her.
- It can be looked at as an expanded "I" viewpoint, but in this case the reader is more or less merged with the narrator. So it's almost a "we" voice.
- It is inclusive in the way that a stereotype can be used to apply to everyone of a certain type. The use of "you" implies that we all share what is happening. For example, lumping all clueless partners together, you might say, "It's three days until Christmas, and you still don't know what to give her."
- It can also invite the reader to become someone they clearly are not ("You hear the gate slam behind you as they lead you off to your cell.") It's almost like role-playing.
- The common wisdom is that it's best used in a short story. I can't give you an example of anything I've read where the entire novel is written in Second Person.

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Third Person Objective is kind of like watching a movie or a TV show.

Slide 9

Remember the old Dragnet television series? Just the facts, Ma'am.

Slide 10

Third Person Objective

- There's no emotional insight or sharing of thoughts – it's more like watching a movie. The only clues you get to what people think are through what they say or do. And then you have to decide whether or not they are correct/lying/missing some information, etcetera, because you don't know what's going on in their head.
- It's kind of like a stripped-down police procedural. If you remember the old Dragnet series on TV, once in a while Jack Webb breaks loose with a scoldy lecture, but a lot of it is just, "10:05 – the suspect enters the apartment. 10:30 – the suspect is seen by a neighbor exiting the apartment."
- You can use it as one way to set a scene, describing events only, before deciding on the voice you want to use. In other words, it could be a good plot-setting tool that you use as though you were marking out a play. "If character A moves over there, what happens to the bad guy hiding behind the couch?" Or even, "Why should my character bother to walk when his car is parked at the curb?" Later editing can catch these logistical problems, but it saves time if you can uncover them up-front.
- Only actions and speech are available to tell the story. The reader does not have insight into anyone's thoughts or emotions except as they show with speech, action, or facial expressions.
 - You know how, when you're watching a movie or a television show, a really good actor can convey an amazing amount of information with just his or her eyes. The camera zooms in on the eyes, and you think, "She's lying, he's afraid, she's bluffing, he's insane, she's angry, he's confused." Well, you can't do that very easily here.
- You can include description, but you can't use adjectives
 - "Birds were pecking at seeds on the ground", "Trees were bowing in the wind", nothing but the facts.
- It could work well in an apocalyptic or existential story, but the reader might never bond with the characters. And speaking just for myself, if I don't bond with at least one character, I don't care what happens and I stop reading.

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Now we come to what is probably the most used POV in modern popular fiction – Third Person Limited, also known as Close Third.

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Third Person Limited (Close Third)

- Here, the writer can only share the thoughts and viewpoint of a single character; others are revealed only by their speech, actions, and facial expressions. In other words, the reader can't suddenly be privy to another character's thoughts or emotions.
- This is a favorite choice in much literature, and one reason is because it helps to create some closeness between the reader and the protagonist. When the reader knows a person's thoughts and emotions, it is easier to identify with – and root for – that character.
- However...depending on the type of story you're writing, it might pay to choose carefully when you consider **whose** thoughts you share with the readers. It may seem obvious to share the protagonist's thoughts, but what if it's the villain's thoughts that the reader sees instead? A thriller or a suspense story might put the reader in the villain's head, leaving it unclear whether the hero will survive.
- No matter who is telling the story, the **reader** will have to decide whether or not to believe that person's version of the events.
 - Is he or she **truthful**, or is there a hidden motivation for deception?
 - Are they seeing events for what they really are or only for how they seem? (In other words, are they **reliable**?) For yet another twist, what if they're delusional, or blinded by love or hatred?

- Also, are they sufficiently aware of all of the facts to make their reporting **accurate**, or are they missing some key component(s)?
- (Note that these same tests can pertain to the **First Person** narrator as well. A lot of writers know how much fun it can be to create an “unreliable narrator,” as I did in my short story **Jump**. It was published and read aloud by **Liars League NYC**, which regularly asks for stories with a particular theme. I don’t remember the exact theme they prompted with that month, but it had to do with truth and lies.)
- It’s also possible to have two people’s POV’s in the story. Really, numerous POV’s are possible, but that can get confusing as well as verging on the Third Person Omniscient (which we’ll cover next.) The accepted wisdom in writing Third Person Limited is to keep it to two voices.
- That is what I did with my book *Unexpected Findings*. I started with the premise of two very different people from different backgrounds being thrust together and ending up needing to help each other. Like a “odd couple”, a “Felix and Oscar”, only this couple discovers that they have to rely on each other in order for each to survive.

My two main characters are a thirteen-year-old girl and an 85-year-old man. When I realized that the story was almost as much about the old man as it was about the girl, that ruled out Young Adult as a genre, and really it ruled out First Person voice as well.

Since there are two protagonists in the book, each of them needed to undergo a character arc to achieve their goals. After much thought, research and experimentation (*including writing it a couple of different ways*), and after consulting with my structural editor, I settled on a Close Third point of view. I alternated which of the two characters’ inner life I revealed, usually by chapter, but occasionally by scene within a chapter. In addition, it was important that each character not know what was going on in the other’s head. This meant that when I was in the girl’s head, the old man had to rely solely on her speech and actions to guess what she felt or thought, and vice versa. **Whichever character’s POV is being used, that’s how the reader must see the world for that section.**

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- I also needed to use a distinctive voice for each of my two protagonists. This seemed easy on the surface, since you would expect an 85-year-old white academician to sound quite different from a 13-year-old black girl who's been living in turbulent circumstances. It actually got easier the more I wrote, until I could almost hear them speaking as though I were taking dictation.
- Although I felt like I knew my two protagonists inside and out, I had to carefully flesh out the other characters through their actions and words. But I could also use Tess and Irv's **reactions to** and **feelings about** the other characters to help to make them more vivid – frightening, comforting, threatening, alien, etc.
- Finally, when a story is moving back and forth between two characters via scenes or chapters, all of the separate parts have to end up in the same place, creating a unified whole story rather than two separate ones.

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But what if you want your readers to be completely clued in to all of the characters? Well, then you probably want to use Third Person Omniscient.

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Third Person Omniscient

- Here, the narrator sees all and can reveal the internal lives of multiple characters – like being God
- It has often been used in epics, both historically and now (Charles Dickens, J.R.R. Tolkien, George R.R. Martin's *Game of Thrones*)

- It is possible for the narrative voice to add **historical details** to which the characters have no insight, since they are living in their present moment.

The same goes for **cultural details** that are just normal life to the characters, but that the reader may need to know about.

Readers can gain **psychological insight** to a character ('Henry is crazy yet kind-hearted'), but in my opinion, narrative background is not a very fun or creative way to disclose that information.

Finally, you might want the narrator to have a **world view** that colors how the tale is told. Think of **Ayn Rand**, whose works (*The Fountainhead*, *Atlas Shrugged*) portrayed a definite viewpoint, and who once said, "*In a certain sense, every novelist is a philosopher, because one cannot present a picture of human existence without a philosophical framework. . . .*"

(I am not espousing Ayn Rand's viewpoint at all, I just want to point out that this POV allows that sort of editorial comment.)

- The narrator can comment on any character's behavior rather than leaving opinion up to the reader. Again, I like to let the reader form his/her own opinion of each character - but that's just me.

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- This POV can work well for thrillers and suspense – none of the characters have an inside track or a guarantee of survival (Stephen King has used it in most of his stories.)
- The narrator's voice needs to be charming or witty or authoritative enough to command respect. Think about the tone the narrative voice wants to use.
 - Mark Twain's narrator was often gently satirical.
 - P.G. Wodehouse was witty about the English upper classes with his Jeeves series.
 - Charles Dickens used his narrator to highlight social inequalities in an ironic tone.
 - George R.R. Martin and J.R.R. Tolkien are **authoritative** in their world creations – you should simply take their word for it.

- Stephen King’s narrator just wants to scare the daylights out of you.

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How does a writer choose the Point of View that he or she wants to use for a particular story?

So many choices – which one to choose?

- Before you decide, try them all – or at least a couple!
- Sally Rooney, best-selling author of *Conversations With Friends* and *Normal People*, wrote version after version of her latest novel using different points of view: first person, close third, epistolary, until something worked.
- “...the deliberate working over of a situation – the telling of it first from one, then from another point of [view] – is an exercise not to be neglected.” - Edith Mirrielees
- “Sometimes a change in POV can provide a breakthrough for the writer.” – Jerome Stern.

Your heroine is telling the story in **First Person** when you suddenly realize that you intend for her survival to be in doubt. So, you change it to **Third Person Omniscient**, but that seems too stiff. Then you realize that her brother, who is central to the plot, should be telling the story, and now you’re in **Third Person Limited** and your story takes off. (I follow this advice, because I’ve experienced it.)

- You will know when the voice becomes real to you and the obstacles are overcome, i.e. when it works (writing is not algebra)

Slide 18

I found this quote written on an index card stuck in a book and dated July 5th, 1998. I have honestly tried very hard to find the source of this quote, because I definitely do not want to plagiarize. But I have so far been unable to find another source, so I guess it's my quote! In any case, I do believe it's true.

We have all heard the maxim that there is no new story under the sun, and that everything has been told before. Whether or not you believe that saying, my response is that the same old stories have not always been told through the same eyes. Male eyes, female eyes, blue and brown eyes, Asian eyes, even extraterrestrial eyes are all worthy voices to tell a tale. And you, as the writer, have free license to write (as authentically as you can) in the voice of any of those eyes. I firmly believe that you do not have to share an identity with the voice that tells your tale. If you did, then almost all science fiction would be labeled "cultural appropriation." Tell your tale as best you can through the voice that works the best for you.

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Here are some of the sources that I used.

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Here is where you can see the slides and contact me if you wish.

Thank you. Are there questions or comments?