

POV: Through the Eyes of the Beholder

How to identify and use different Narrative Mode techniques to bring life to your story

By Matthew White

It is hard to believe that I have been writing for over a year now and in that year, I have made new friends, published a website, and written sixteen stories, and have planned out almost a dozen more. It has been a most worthwhile endeavor, one that I hope to continue for many years. As with any freshman writer, I have made quite a few mistakes, some of them were pointed out to me, and others I found on my own. But in an entire year's worth of critique, very little seems to focus on the basics. Spelling, grammar, sentence structure, and other basic factors are often ignored, in favor of being true to canon, true to the character and so forth. While these last two items may be important, depending on what the writer is trying to

accomplish, nothing trumps the basics. This essay is the first in a series, that will touch on some of the rudimentary points of good writing and it is my hope that new writers will find some of these points helpful. Am I an expert? Let me answer that with a very resounding no! But I am willing to share what I have learned in the hope that others will learn from my mistakes.

The topic of this piece is character POV or point of view, also called **Narrative Mode**. When writing a story, the author has several choices of the type of POV he or she will choose for a story. Here is a list of the most common options for Narrative Mode.

1. **First Person** – The author is writing from inside the head of the viewpoint character using him or her to narrate the story. The author uses the pronoun I.
2. **Third Person** – The author is writing from inside the head of the viewpoint

character but narrating the story him or herself. The author uses the pronouns he or she.

3. **Third Person Objective** – The author is writing from outside the head of the focal character, using the pronouns he or she.

4. **Multiple Person or Head Hopping** – The author is writing from inside the heads of more than one character in a scene using the pronouns he or she.

5. **Omniscient** – The author is writing from inside or outside the heads of multiple characters from the perspective of a god like persona who knows things that none of the characters know.

6. **Second Person** – The author is writing from inside the head of the viewpoint character using the pronoun you.

To start, let us look at First Person. As stated above, the scene, or sometimes the entire story

is being narrated through the eyes of the viewpoint character, usually the chief protagonist. The advantage of this style is that the reader can become intimately bonded to the main lead. In a well written piece, the reader becomes the viewpoint character. Although this technique works best in short stories, it has been used successfully in full length novels, such as Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. I know of three examples in recent fiction that take advantage of this technique. The first one that comes to mind is a *Thunderbirds* fan fiction story written by Teobi titled *His Father's Son*. In this story Scott Tracy finds out that an old girlfriend had conceived a child while they were together. Julie's use of First Person made this a very powerful and emotional short story. Two other full length novels that come to mind are from *Star Trek*, *Dreadnought* and *Battlestations*, both written by Diane Cary. These novels look at the *Star Trek* universe through the eyes of Lieutenant

Commander Piper, a recent Starfleet Academy graduate and command candidate. First Person was used throughout both stories creating a very dramatic climax.

Another technique that can be applied in conjunction with First Person is deliberate deception. Because a character in the story is doing the narrating, he or she can sway the reader away from the truth by being an unreliable narrator. Imagine looking at the world through the eyes of a psychopathic killer who is justifying his or her actions. If the piece was written well enough you could find yourself rooting for the bad guy. First Person POV can also be a very powerful tool for writing mysteries, as the reader can only see the things that the protagonist sees.

Last year I wrote a short story for UFO called *Beaver James*. The story focused on the last hour of this man's life and looking back I see that it would have had a much more profound

effect had I written it in First Person. In the process of writing this essay I did tackle the project of rewriting the story in First Person. Here is an example of First Person POV.

In the supply room at SHADO HQ, I looked at the clock as I pulled a white container off the shelf. It was 09:30 and the difficult task of checking the personal effects belonging to Astronaut Andrew Conroy had fallen to me. Although I did not know Conroy well I still felt a sense of terrible remorse for my fallen comrade. Just this morning, Colonel Foster had mentioned that they still did not know why Conroy had snapped and not knowing made this job even harder than it should be.

While First Person is a powerful viewpoint, especially if it is used throughout the story, it does have one major disadvantage. The viewpoint character can only be in one place at

a time. In a story with action on multiple fronts, the reader will only learn of these events when the viewpoint character does. This is something for the author to consider when contemplating the use of this technique.

The next choice on the list is Third Person, the most commonly used form. In this mode the author is the narrator and he or she will pick one person in a scene to be the viewpoint character. The reader is allowed to see, smell, taste, feel, and know the inner thoughts of the viewpoint character. The only way that the reader will know the thoughts of the other characters in the scene is by what they say, how they say it, or more subtle methods such as body language, or even by how well the viewpoint character knows the person that he or she is talking to. In my recent story, *Demons of the Deep*, I wrote this passage.

The men on the deck finish inflating the raft and two of them began paddling out to retrieve the little girl and her rescuer. A few minutes later the life raft reached the pair and they were pulled to safety.

“Matt?”

Hewett turned to his wife seeing the unspoken question in her eyes. He nodded knowingly and Virginia climbed down from the bridge.

“What was that about?” asked Morton.

“Moral support,” said Matt. “That little girl is going to be scared to death, and being surrounded by a bunch of men isn’t going to help. Gin is going down to meet them in sickbay. The girl is less likely to panic with Virginia being there.”

“Good idea,” said a bemused Morton.

In this story, Matt is the viewpoint character and we are seeing things through his eyes. But

as you can see Commander Morton had no idea what had been exchanged between Matt and his wife, until it was explained. Because Matt and Virginia know each other well enough to hold a conversation without words, by mentioning an unspoken question, the reader knows that something has been exchanged between them although they don't yet know what. Had Matt been alone on the bridge I could have accomplished the same thing with internal dialogue. But I was able to convey Virginia's thoughts to the reader without switching the viewpoint character.

The choice of the viewpoint character is a very important one, as this is the person that the author wants the reader to identify with. In the above story, Matt and Virginia are the co-protagonists, so either one of them could have been the viewpoint character. I chose Matt, because he was staying on the bridge and that is where the scene was going to continue. In order to make the right choice for the viewpoint

character it may be necessary to write the scene both ways and then decide which character carries it better. The overall effect can be markedly different depending on whose point of view is being shown.

With Third Person Objective, the author gives up one of the most important tools he or she has over a movie, the ability to show the viewpoint character's feelings and thoughts. In order to successfully pen a story in this mode the writer must be very descriptive of both the surroundings and the body language of the characters. Unlike a movie, where the viewer can see the subtleties, a reader is depending on the author to provide the clues needed to follow the story. When done well, this technique allows the reader to form their own opinions about the character, without any bias from the author. Most news articles are written in Third Person Objective mode. Here is the excerpt from *Demons of the Deep* written in Objective mode;

The men on the deck finish inflating the raft and two of them began paddling out to retrieve the little girl and her rescuer. A few minutes later the life raft reached the pair and they were pulled to safety.

“Matt?”

Hewett turned to his wife. He nodded and Virginia climbed down from the bridge.

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“Moral support,” said Matt. “That little girl is going to be scared to death, and being surrounded by a bunch of men isn’t going to help. Gin is going down to meet them in sickbay. The girl is less likely to panic with Virginia being there.”

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Notice that we are not given a clue to Matt's thoughts except by his explanation to Commander Morton. In this example the reader is as much in the dark as Morton is. The only hints are the visual clues given. It is very important to remember to give the reader these visual clues if you are going to write in this mode.

The next mode, Multiple Person or Head Hopping is considered, by some writers, to be undesirable, but it is used quite extensively in writing romance. In this mode the viewpoint character changes during a scene, and the reader is allowed to know the thoughts and feelings of everyone in a scene who is portrayed as a viewpoint character. Using this method works best with two people. Any more than that, in my opinion, can cause confusion to the reader. The biggest disadvantage, to this mode of narration, is that the reader does not identify specifically with one of the characters, which is normally what a writer wants. That being said

there are times when the writer wants the reader to know the thoughts of both people in a scene, a passionate love scene between the two main characters. One of the best examples of Multiple Person or Head Hopping is Margaret Mitchell's Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *Gone With the Wind*. As you can see this technique can be quite successful, if it's written well. Here is an example of Multiple Person POV from my story *Soul Mates*;

Ed pulled up to Virginia's place around quarter past five. He walked into the foyer and stepped onto the elevator as her apartment was on the third floor. Ed knocked on the door and he was totally unprepared when Virginia answered the door as she looked absolutely stunning. Ed was left speechless as he gazed at her.

"Well come in," she said, "I'll only be a few minutes."

Ed found his voice and said, “You look beautiful Colonel.”

She responded teasing, “I’m off duty, its Virginia, or Ginny until Monday morning and may I say you look absolutely dashing yourself. Can I get you something to drink?”

Ed looked around the room; in the center of the living room was a Steinway Grand piano. “No, thank you. May I?” he asked pointing to the piano.

“Please, I didn’t know you played,” he sat down at the piano, “I’m a little out of practice.” He said as he played a few bars of The Entertainer. He then transitioned into Alexander Borodin’s Polovetsian Dances, and finished with Memory from the musical Cats.

“Ed, you play beautifully.” She was pleasantly surprised; no one she had ever been involved with shared her love for music, much less had talent surpassing her.

“It helps reduce stress, I should play more often.” observed Straker. He looked at his watch, and stood up. “Shall we go?”

Virginia took his arm. She couldn’t deny the chemistry at work. This is going to be interesting. They walked to the elevator. When they got to the car Ed opened the passenger side. Straker climbed in the driver’s seat and they pulled out onto the street.

This scene is Ed and Virginia’s first date and I wanted the reader to know what both of them were thinking and feeling. It’s a trade off, the writer sacrifices having the reader identify with one character in order to show both points of view.

The most important point I want to make here is that using the technique of Multiple Person should be a conscious choice made by the author. Using this mode by accident is an easy mistake to make, something that I spotted in

my earlier work. My later pieces tend to stick with Third Person and if I do write a scene using Multiple Person POV, it will be by design, not by accident. This statement holds true for any writing technique.

Omniscient, somewhat popular in the 18th and 19th centuries, is outright shunned by most modern writers, based on my research. This mode involves knowing the thoughts, and feelings of all the characters in a scene from a god like point of view. The narrator will know things about the people that they do not yet know themselves. While rare, there are certain types of stories that may make good use of this technique. From my research I found that the best way to apply this technique, is by knowing how much to reveal to the reader. Too much information can ruin the tension aspect of a story. Like Multiple Person POV, it takes a very good writer to pull off a story with this mode of narration. Because this mode is considered an advanced writing technique I would not

recommended that a new writer attempt using it until they are well versed in the first four modes.

The rarest mode used in literature, although quite common in song lyrics is Second Person. In this mode the narrator refers to one of the characters in a story as you. It gives the effect that the narrator is one of the characters in the story. While a talented author can create a beautifully crafted story in this mode, most prefer to write in Third Person. Like Omniscient POV this method is considered to be an advanced writing technique. One very fine example of Second Person style is Jay McInerney's novel, *Bright Lights, Big City*.

Like other aspects of writing like, spelling, grammar, plot, characterization, these six modes of narration are tools of the trade, when applied properly, along with the other basics, they can turn a mediocre piece into a must read. I do not wish to discourage anyone from trying

their hand at the advanced methods. Writing is an exploration and there are those who possess the gift of eloquent expression. Writing is also a craft, and a craft can be improved upon, and no matter how long you have been writing, whether it is measured in months or years, you can always improve that craft. Personally I don't subscribe to the notion that any of these techniques are wrong or taboo to use. Any one of these methods can be powerful vehicles of literary expression, in the hands of a knowledgeable and skilled writer.