

Writing in the First Person

Writing is really acting so for many writers it feels more natural to write/act in the first person.

The benefit of telling a story in **first person** is that readers discover the voice and psychology of a character as expressed directly by the character. This gives a sense of immediacy, the sense of 'being there'. The pronouns 'he' and 'she' in the third person make the reader more conscious of the narrating voice. It stands a little more apart from the characters whose stories are told.

On the minus side, first person narration can restrict your readers' access to the inner worlds of your other characters. The story is narrated from a single person's perspective, with all the limitations that fixed perspective involves. There are ways to get around this. For instance you can use multiple first person narrators to tell your story.

If your narrator is an anti-hero, keep in mind that some readers may not like looking at the world through the eyes of an unpleasant or unethical person. This is why it's often wise to give an anti-hero some likeable qualities, just as it is wise to give likeable protagonists flaws. Every character you write should be vulnerable and likeable in some way. Otherwise they will remain two-dimensional.

Regardless of the strengths and drawbacks of first person narrators, it's crucial to write compelling, effective ones.

1. Evoke the senses, not only the narrator's inner world

When you're writing in the first person it can be tempting to let your narrator dwell on their thoughts and feelings extensively. Often characters can seem scant if they only ever focus on their mental and emotional processes. Have your character describe not only thoughts but how their world feels, looks, sounds, tastes and smells.

When you use a first person narrator, ask:

What senses are strongest in this particular character and what does that say about them?

How can I give the reader a greater sense of an embodied narrator and not just a disembodied, storytelling 'I'?

Remember to ground your narrator's observations in the material world, because this will add colour and depth to your story. Focusing on all aspects of your narrator's experience, physical and otherwise, is one way to write a great narrator.

2. Avoid overusing words that place distance between the narrator and your reader

Because the narrator uses the first person 'I' (and sometimes the plural 'we') to tell the bulk of the story in first person narration, you may be tempted to begin sentences with 'I' a lot. Take this sentence for example:

'I saw that the door was closed and I heard a faint scratching noise coming from within the house. I thought it sounded like someone trying to dig a tunnel out.'

The words 'I saw', 'I heard' and 'I thought' all place the reader at one remove to the unfolding events. The reader isn't seeing, hearing or thinking these things through the narrator. The reader is *being told about* the narrator's experiences. The scene could be more vivid if the narrator didn't 'report' her or his experience. The snippet could be rewritten as follows:

'The door was closed and a faint scratching noise came from within the house. It sounded like someone trying to dig a tunnel out, I thought.'

The reader is placed at the scene, seeing the door and hearing the scratching.

In some cases you might want to create distance between the narrator and reader for creative reasons. You might want the reader *not* to see the scene so vividly in their mind's eye.

3. Avoid merely reporting in first person narrative

A first person narrator gets to share their lived experience and take the reader along with them through every surprise, challenge or victory. Describing things that happen to your narrator in the passive voice is a common mistake. You may want to emphasise your character's passive response to a specific situation, so there are exceptions. However, compare:

'As I was trying the door to the house, a sudden voice behind me told me it was locked.'

As a reader, you're not placed in the scene, trying the handle and hearing the voice. A stronger alternative would be:

*'The handle turned but the door would not budge.
'It's locked.'
I spun round, surprised by this sudden voice.'*

This is stronger because speaking voices appearing in the text give readers a sense of immediacy, of the present moment in which the action unfolds.

4. Vary the way your narrator expresses feelings, thoughts and experiences

This might seem obvious, but many writers make this mistake. If your character is a sensitive or emotional type, they might describe feelings often throughout your story. But avoid repetitive descriptions:

'I felt perturbed by the scratching sound that came from within the house. I felt more anxious still when I tried the door and it was locked.'

Instead of repeating 'I felt', vary descriptions with words such as 'my', articles ('a' or 'the') and other alternatives.

The previous example could be rewritten as:

'My sense of foreboding grew as I noticed a scratching sound coming from within the house. Fear surged when I tried the door and found it locked.'

Maintaining variety in your first person narrator's self-expression is important because it increases the sense that the character is real. It also helps to prevent repetitive word choice from distracting the reader and rather lets the reader stay immersed in your unfolding story.

5. Make the narrating voice consistent with the narrator's backstory

One common trap with writing first person stories is that the narrator sounds a lot like the voice of the author, pegged onto a series of events. To give your narrator real personality, make sure that their voice is consistent with what you tell the reader about their backstory and ongoing development.

Remember your narrator is a real person with a history, likes and dislikes, views and opinions, thoughts and fears, guilt and obsessions an overdraft, a facebook account they can't remember the password for etc.

Pay attention to:

Background: Where is your character from? Think about things like accent, regional slang or idioms that they would likely use

Class: What is your narrator's level of education and economic privilege? How might this impact on elements such as vocabulary and whether they use formal vs. informal speech predominantly?

Personality: Is your narrator a character who is brash and coarse? Or elegant and refined?

Make sure that your narrator uses language in way that is fitting with their background, class and personality. If you're writing about a poor 14-year-old girl who runs away from home, these details of her life story should feel compatible with the words she uses to tell her story.

6. Learn from the greats

As with any aspect of craft you want to develop, it's always a good idea to take notes from the writing of your favourite authors. Many novels widely taught as classics use the intimacy of first person narration.

From Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* ('Call me Ishmael', says the narrator at the start) to Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, examples of the above suggestions can be found.

Harper Lee's first person narrator doesn't open *Mockingbird* with 'I thought', 'I felt' or 'I saw'. The novel begins:

'When he was nearly thirteen, my brother Jem got his arm badly broken at the elbow. When it healed, and Jem's fears of never being able to play football again were assuaged, he was seldom self-conscious about his injury.'

That the young narrator of *To Kill a Mockingbird* goes by the nickname "Scout" is very appropriate. In the story, Scout functions as both questioner and observer. Scout asks tough questions, certainly questions that aren't "politically correct," but she can ask these questions because she is a child. As a child, Scout doesn't understand the full implication of the things happening around her, making her an objective observer and a reporter in the truest sense.

To Kill a Mockingbird however, really presents two Scouts: the little girl experiencing the story and the adult Jean Louise who tells the story. The woman relating the story obviously recognizes that her father is exceptional. However, the child Scout complains, "Our father didn't do anything . . . he never went hunting, he did not play poker or fish or drink or smoke. He sat in the living room and read."

