WHO IS TELLING THIS STORY?

Choosing viewpoint, controlling knowledge and deciding whose experience leads

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"I knew Felix was lying because he had polished his shoes."

"Ruth knew Felix was lying because he had polished his shoes."

"Felix had polished his shoes to look trustworthy. Ruth took one look at them and became suspicious."

The event is similar in each version. The reader's position changes.

In the first, Ruth tells her own story. In the second, a third-person narration gives us her judgement. In the third, the narration has access to both Felix's intention and Ruth's response. The shoes have barely moved, but the storytelling arrangements have.

Viewpoint concerns the perspective through which a story is presented. Choosing it means deciding whose perceptions, knowledge and interpretations guide readers, and how the narrator delivers them. That choice affects suspense, intimacy, humour and what you can reveal.

It is worth making deliberately, even if you discover the best approach by trying several versions.

DISTINGUISH THE NARRATOR FROM THE AUTHOR

The author writes the book. The narrator is the voice that tells it. They may share vocabulary or interests, but they are not automatically the same person.

A first-person narrator can be vain, mistaken, generous, evasive or convinced that everyone else is behaving unreasonably. The novel may allow readers to see beyond that account.

A third-person narrator also has an approach. It might be restrained, intimate, conversational or openly opinionated. Third person does not mean the absence of voice.

Ask who seems to be speaking and what relationship that voice has with the events. Is the story being told during the experience, from some later point or through an established storyteller who can move beyond one person's knowledge?

You do not have to explain the arrangement in a formal introduction. You do need to understand it well enough that the narration's access and tone feel purposeful.

Readers can accept many arrangements. Trouble often begins when the book changes them without giving readers a reason to follow.

FIRST PERSON OFFERS A PARTICULAR KIND OF ACCESS

In first person, a narrator uses "I" to tell events from their position. Their selection and interpretation can become central pleasures of the book.

Ruth might give a detailed account of Felix's suspicious footwear while failing to mention that she has already opened his private letter. What she considers relevant tells us something about her.

First person can create intimacy, but it does not automatically guarantee it. A narrator may be guarded, formal or determined to discuss everything except the painful matter nearby.

Think about the telling position. Ruth describing an event years later may know its outcome and interpret it differently from Ruth experiencing it. A story told close to the moment may preserve uncertainty more directly.

Neither choice is compulsory. Consistency and clear handling matter more than a claim that first person must always feel immediate.

Also watch what the narrator could know. If Ruth describes Felix's private conversation, establish how that information reached her or make clear that she is imagining it.

THIRD PERSON CAN STAY WITH ONE EXPERIENCE

A limited third-person approach uses names and pronouns such as "she" or "he" while generally restricting a passage's access to one character's experience.

We can follow Ruth into the room, hear what she hears and know what she thinks. We can observe Felix's expression without directly entering his mind.

"Felix smiled. Ruth had seen more reassuring expressions on people returning broken appliances."

The sentence gives us Ruth's interpretation. It does not establish that Felix is privately amused, guilty or frightened. Those possibilities can remain open.

You can write limited third person at different distances. A passage may describe Ruth's experience relatively broadly or adopt language that feels close to her immediate thoughts. The pronoun alone does not determine that distance.

A useful question is whether a detail belongs to the viewpoint character's perception, an inference they could make or an unannounced source of knowledge. If the source has changed, decide whether that change fits the narrative approach you have established.

OMNISCIENCE IS CONTROLLED RANGE

An omniscient narrator can know more than one character and more than the characters know. It may explain a history, reveal opposing intentions or comment from a broader perspective.

The strength lies in deliberate selection. Access to everyone's mind does not oblige you to report every thought in every conversation.

For instance, the narrator might tell us that Felix polished his shoes to reassure Ruth, then show why Ruth interprets the effort badly. The humour comes partly from information neither character fully shares.

An established narrative voice can guide these shifts. Without that guidance, rapidly entering several minds may feel less like breadth and more like being handed three radios tuned to different stations.

If you want omniscient narration, practise transitions and decide what the wider access contributes. If you want limited narration, do not call an accidental knowledge jump omniscience simply to avoid revising it.

The goal is a readable relationship between the narrator's range and the reader's expectations.

SECOND PERSON IS A DIFFERENT RELATIONSHIP

Second-person narration addresses a character as "you": "You recognize Felix's shoes before you recognize his face."

That can create immediacy, estrangement, accusation or other effects, depending on context. The "you" might be a specific fictional person rather than a claim that every actual reader shares the experience.

Distinguish sustained second-person storytelling from an occasional general address, such as "You know how difficult family dinners can be." A first-person narrator can address a listener without the whole novel becoming second person.

If you are considering the approach, write a substantial scene and listen to what the address does. Does it suit the narrator's relationship with the person addressed? Can you sustain it beyond an arresting opening?

There is no prize for choosing the least common pronoun. Choose an arrangement that develops the story's experience and gives you useful possibilities. Familiar approaches can still produce highly individual work.

TENSE AND VIEWPOINT ARE DIFFERENT CHOICES

A first-person story can use past tense: "I opened the letter." It can use present tense: "I open the letter." Third person can do either too.

Tense helps establish the relationship between narration and the timing of events. Viewpoint concerns perspective and access. They interact, but choosing one does not settle the other.

Past tense does not require distant narration. Present tense does not prevent reflection, summary or description. Read for the actual effect instead of assuming the grammar will create it automatically.

When changing tense in a draft, inspect meaning rather than relying on replacement. Memories, earlier events, habits and hypothetical situations may need different handling.

For an exploratory exercise, write a short passage in first-person past and third-person present, then reverse the combinations. Notice which changes come from the perspective and which come from timing or rhythm.

Keep the version that serves the scene, not the one that merely sounds unfamiliar enough to feel improved.

CONTROL WHAT READERS KNOW AND WHEN

Viewpoint is an information decision. If readers remain with Ruth, they may share her uncertainty about Felix. If they enter Felix's perspective earlier, they may know what he is concealing and worry about Ruth's response.

The first arrangement can support a question of discovery. The second can support suspense through a knowledge gap between reader and character. Both can work with the same underlying events.

Choose according to the experience you want. Do you want readers to suspect alongside Ruth, recognize her mistake before she does or understand both people while watching them misunderstand each other?

Avoid withholding a viewpoint character's immediate, relevant knowledge merely to manufacture a surprise. If Ruth knows exactly what is in the letter, a narration that repeatedly calls it "the thing" may feel evasive unless the telling situation gives that avoidance a convincing purpose.

A character can resist thinking about something. Make that resistance part of the experience rather than using it as an invisible curtain.

MAKE MULTIPLE VIEWPOINTS EARN THEIR SPACE

A novel can alternate between several viewpoint characters. Each perspective should contribute more than access to a convenient location.

Perhaps Ruth understands the family history, Felix understands the financial problem and a third person notices how their argument affects someone neither is paying attention to. Their perspectives can create different kinds of knowledge and emotional pressure.

Before adding a viewpoint, ask what it makes possible and what it costs. Additional perspectives can broaden a story but may interrupt attachment, repeat information or require readers to maintain several unresolved threads.

You do not need equal chapter counts. You do need a purposeful pattern and enough orientation when the perspective changes.

Chapter breaks and scene breaks often provide clear opportunities for transitions in limited narration. Establish who we are following early in the new section. A heading can help, but the prose should also locate the reader in the new experience.

Track knowledge separately so one character does not accidentally inherit another's discoveries.

LET THE WORLD LOOK DIFFERENT THROUGH DIFFERENT PEOPLE

Distinct viewpoints are not created only by changing names at the top of chapters. Different people notice different things and attach different meanings to them.

Ruth notices the shoes because she associates unusual tidiness with concealment. Felix notices the carpet because he has walked through wet grass and is trying not to leave evidence of the route he took.

The same room can become a field of social threats, useful objects, memories or aesthetic pleasures depending on the observer.

Vocabulary and sentence habits can help distinguish perspectives, but avoid reducing a character to a repeated catchphrase. Let priorities and assumptions shape the selection of information too.

If two viewpoints describe the same event, ask what the second version changes. A new interpretation, crucial omission or emotional contrast can justify a return. Repeating the complete conversation with different thought tags may simply delay the next development.

Difference should add understanding, not merely another witness statement to the filing cabinet.

USE UNRELIABILITY WITH A DISCERNIBLE PURPOSE

An unreliable narrator provides an account readers have reason to question. The cause may be deception, limited understanding, self-justification, memory or another established feature of the telling.

Unreliability is not simply a synonym for being unpleasant, confused or living with a mental health condition. Consider the specific gap between the account and what the story enables readers to infer.

Ruth may insist she is uninterested in Felix's opinion while reporting every word he says. The discrepancy can reveal more than a direct confession would.

Provide signals suited to the intended effect. Contradictions, other people's reactions and consequences can help readers recognize limitations without immediately explaining everything.

You can delay understanding, but the later interpretation should make meaningful sense of earlier evidence. If the narration can retract anything without preparation, readers may struggle to know why any observation deserves attention.

Decide what kind of trust remains. Even when factual reliability is uncertain, voice, emotional truth or a consistent pattern of self-deception can sustain engagement.

TRY ONE EVENT THROUGH THREE ARRANGEMENTS

Choose a short encounter with a hidden intention. Someone arrives to ask a favour while pretending the visit is casual.

First, write it in the visitor's first person. Let us know the favour and experience the attempt to avoid asking.

Next, write limited third person from the host's perspective. The host does not know the purpose, but can notice unusual behaviour.

Finally, write from a broader narrator who understands both. Use that access selectively rather than transcribing every thought.

Keep the event similar so you can compare the effects. Which version produces the most useful tension? Where does the humour fall? Whose vulnerability matters most? What becomes too easy to explain?

You are not required to publish three versions or choose the most technically impressive one. The exercise reveals the storytelling opportunities each arrangement gives you.

If you are drafting a novel, test a passage that resembles its central experience, not only a scene whose trick works particularly well in one perspective.

MAKE A SIMPLE VIEWPOINT AGREEMENT WITH YOURSELF

Write a short note describing the manuscript's approach. Identify the narrator or narrators, the principal viewpoint characters, the usual range of knowledge and how perspective changes are signalled.

The note is a working aid, not a rulebook that forbids experimentation. Update it if the book's needs change.

During revision, inspect places where knowledge appears unexpectedly, the voice changes without purpose or readers lose track of whose experience they occupy. A useful outside-reader question is: "Did you ever feel moved into another person's mind before you understood why?"

Then ask whether the arrangement supports the story as a whole. Does it preserve the right uncertainties, give emotional access where needed and allow the ending to deliver its intended effect?

Ruth's interpretation of the polished shoes can lead three very different stories. The choice is not merely who gets to say "I." It is where you invite readers to stand while the truth gradually becomes visible.

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