

## 8. NARRATIVE VOICE

Someone in your story has to tell us that Jeff pulled out his gun, that Samantha smiled at the tall stranger, that daylight was breaking over the valley. That someone is the narrator or “author’s persona.”

The author’s persona of a fictional narrative can help or hinder the success of the story. Which persona you adopt depends on what kind of story you are trying to tell, and what kind of emotional atmosphere works best for the story.

The persona develops from the personality and attitude of the narrator, which are expressed by the narrator’s choice of words and incidents. These in turn depend on the point of view of the story.

*First-person* point of view is usually subjective: we learn the narrator’s thoughts, feelings, and reactions to events. In *first-person objective*, however, the narrator tells us only what people said and did, without comment.

Other first-person modes include:

- the observer-narrator, outside the main story (examples: Mr. Lockwood in *Wuthering Heights*, Nick Carraway in *The Great Gatsby*)
- detached autobiography (narrator looking back on long-past events)
- multiple narrators (first-person accounts by several characters)
- interior monologue (narrator recounts the story as a memory; stream of consciousness is an extreme form of this narrative)
- dramatic monologue (narrator tells story out loud without interruption)
- letter/diary (narrator writes down events as they happen)

If the point of view is first-person, questions about the persona are simple: the character narrating the story has a particular personality and attitude, which is plausibly expressed by the way he or she describes events.

The *second-person* mode is rare: *You knocked on the door. You went inside.* Very few writers feel the need for it, and still fewer use it effectively.

If the point of view is *third-person limited*, persona again depends on the single character through whose eyes we witness the story. You may go inside the character’s mind and tell us how that character thinks and feels, or you may describe outside events in terms the character would use. Readers like this point of view because they know whom to “invest” in or identify with.

In *third-person objective*, we have no entry to anyone's thoughts or feelings. The author simply describes, without emotion or editorializing, what the characters say and do. The author's persona here is almost non-existent. Readers may be unsure whose fate they should care about, but it can be very powerful precisely because it invites the reader to supply the emotion that the persona does not. This is the persona of the medieval Icelandic sagas, which inspired not only Ernest Hemingway but a whole generation of "hard-boiled" writers.

If the point of view is *third-person omniscient*, however, the author's persona can develop in any of several directions:

1. **"Episodically limited."** Whoever is the point of view for a particular scene determines the persona. An archbishop sees and describes events from his particular point of view, while a pickpocket does so quite differently. So the narrator, in a scene from the archbishop's point of view, has a persona quite different from that of the pickpocket: a different vocabulary, a different set of values, a different set of priorities. (As a general rule, point of view should not change during a scene. So if an archbishop is the point of view in a scene involving him and a pickpocket, we shouldn't suddenly switch to the pickpocket's point of view until we've resolved the scene and moved on to another scene.)
2. **"Occasional interruptor."** The author intervenes from time to time to supply necessary information, but otherwise stays in the background. The dialogue, thoughts and behavior of the characters supply all other information the reader needs.
3. **"Editorial commentator."** The author's persona has a distinct attitude toward the story's characters and events, and frequently comments on them. The editorial commentator may be a character in the story, often with a name, but is usually at some distance from the main events; in some cases, we may even have an editorial commentator reporting the narrative of someone else about events involving still other people. The editorial commentator is not always reliable; he or she may lie to us, or misunderstand the true significance of events.

Third-person omniscient gives you the most freedom to develop the story, and it works especially well in stories with complex plots or large settings where we must use multiple viewpoints to tell the story.

Third-person omniscient can, however, cause the reader to feel uncertain about whom to identify with in the story. If you are going to skip from one point of view to another, do so early in the story, before the reader has fully identified with the original point of view.

The author's persona can influence the reader's reaction by helping the reader to feel close to or distant from the characters. Three major hazards are connected to use of the persona:

- 1. Sentimentality.** The author's editorial rhetoric tries to evoke an emotional response that the story's events cannot evoke by themselves – something like a cheerleader trying to win applause for a team that doesn't deserve it. A particular problem for the "editorial commentator."
- 2. Mannerism.** The author's persona seems more important than the story itself, and the author keeps reminding us of his or her presence through stylistic flamboyance, quirks of diction, or outright editorializing about the characters and events of the story. Also a problem for the editorial commentator. However, if the point of view is first person, and the narrator is a person given to stylistic flamboyance, quirks of diction, and so on, then the problem disappears; the persona is simply that of a rather egotistical individual who likes to show off.
- 3. Frigidity.** The persona's excessive objectivity trivializes the events of the story, suggesting that the characters' problems need not be taken seriously: a particular hazard for "hardboiled" fiction in the objective mode, whether first person or third person.

Verb tense can also affect the narrative style of the story. Most stories use the past tense: *I knocked on the door. She pulled out her gun.* This is usually quite adequate although flashbacks can cause awkwardness: *I had knocked on the door. She had pulled out her gun.* A little of that goes a long way.

Be careful to stay consistently in one verb tense unless your narrator is a person who might switch tenses: *So I went to see my probation officer, and she tells me I can't hang out with my old buddies any more.*

Some writers achieve a kind of immediacy through use of the present tense: *I knock on the door. She pulls out her gun.* We don't feel anyone knows the outcome of events because they are occurring as we read, in "real time." Some writers also enjoy the present tense because it seems "arty" or experimental. But most readers – at least of genre fiction – don't enjoy the present tense, so editors are often reluctant to let their authors use it.

### **Assignment:**

Write a scene between a man and a woman. First write it in third-person limited from the woman's point of view. Then do the same from the man's point of view. Notice the changes in detail: How does the male POV differ from the female? Does he notice things that the woman misses, or vice versa? Are their vocabularies different?

Now write the scene from the woman's POV in third-person omniscient, with a follow-up scene from the man's POV. At the end of the woman's scene, she has learned something. In the follow-up scene, has the man learned the same thing, or is he operating under a different impression of what's just happened? Do you need to make this contrast explicit, or can you leave it to the reader's to draw the appropriate conclusion?

From Write a Novel (<http://crofsblogs.typepad.com/novel/>), a resource created by Crawford Kilian, Communications Instructor at Capilano College, North Vancouver BC.

©Crawford Kilian, 2006.