**Writing as Reader: Point of View**

You can choose to write in the first, second or third person.

**First person (I/We)**

This is the easiest way to convey a character’s story from their perspective. F. Scott Fitzgerald writes in the first person as Nick in *The Great Gatsby*. Nick is a self-conscious narrator, drawing the reader’s attention to the fact he is telling a story. He is also unreliable, allowing Fitzgerald to suggest that truth can be subjective. (Both are modernist concepts.)

Other first person options are the interior monologue, where a first person narrator voices their thoughts as they occur, and first person stream of consciousness, a more extreme version of the interior monologue where we feel we are in the writer’s head, and where the grammar and structure suggest the random and fragmentary nature of thought.

The disadvantage of the first person is that it is difficult to express other viewpoints. Fitzgerald gets round this problem through dialogue, when other characters are given voices, and through eye witness accounts, such as when Jordan tells Nick the story of Daisy’s marriage to Tom in chapter four.

**Second Person (You)**

This is a hard perspective to write from, as you have to use the ‘you’ pronoun throughout, and it is seldom used in literature. It can be very effective however, and if you are confident you can sustain it, it can work well. Here is an example of a second person narrative:

*You left home early this morning. Later you ask yourself why? Was it a premonition? But at the time you just thought it would be a good idea to pop in and see Mum before heading for the office. You missed seeing her. It won’t be long though Mum. The new house is big enough for all of us and you’ll be safe. You remind yourself that there’s only thirty minutes to spare. You mustn’t be late again or you’ll be sacked.*

The second person voice, because it is so unusual, creates mystery. By appearing to address the reader directly, it also invites us to see events through the character’s eyes.

**Third Person (He, She, They)**

This is the most common perspective to write from. You can move from one character to another and still convey their thoughts. You can also be a detached, omniscient narrator who describes events from afar, or a close third person narrator where you describe events from that character’s perspective, much as you would in the first person (also known as free indirect style.) You can also use a first person stream of consciousness

When we're looking at the world through one character's point of view we have to remember that while they can see other people's expressions they can't see their own.

Which of the following examples is an effective usage of the close third person narrator and which doesn’t work?

*Joe didn't know what to say or do. Helen looked furious.  Her cheeks flared red as she spat out the words, 'I hate you.'  He felt his jaw tighten in response as he stopped himself shouting back.*

*Joe didn't know what to say or do. Helen looked furious.  Her cheeks flared red as she spat out the words, 'I hate you.'  A muscle flickered along his jawline as he stopped himself shouting back.*

**Over to you:**

Write a paragraph describing a character’s feelings as he or she sits an exam from a first person perspective. Rewrite it in the second and third person and consider the effect of the different perspectives.

**Psychic Distance.**

Whichever person you use, you will need to think about the *psychic distance*, how far you are away from the character whose perspective you are showing. Read these extracts from *The Great Gatsby* and consider how close the narrator is to the character. Put them in order, from the closest to the furthest away.

*On Sunday morning while church bells rang in the villages alongshore, the world and its mistress returned to Gatsby’s house and twinkled hilariously on his lawn. (Chapter four).*

*Suddenly I wasn’t thinking of Daisy and Gatsby any more, but of this clean, hard, limited person, who dealt in universal scepticism, and who leaned back jauntily just within the circle of my arm. A phrase began to beat in my ears with a sort of heady excitement: “There are only the pursued, the pursuing, the busy and the tired.” (Chapter four).*

*The lights grow brighter as the earth lurches away from the sun, and now the orchestra is playing yellow cocktail music, and the opera of voices pitches a key higher. Laughter is easier minute by minute, spilled with prodigality, tipped out at a cheerful word. The groups change more swiftly, swell with new arrivals, dissolve and form in the same breath; already there are wanderers, confident girls who weave here and there among the stouter and more stable, become for a sharp, joyous moment the centre of a group, and then, excited with triumph, glide on through the sea-change of faces and voices and color under the constantly changing light. (Chapter three)*

*In my younger and more vulnerable years my father gave me some advice that I’ve been turning over in my mind ever since.*

*“Whenever you feel like criticizing any one,” he told me, “just remember that all the people in this world haven’t had the advantages that you’ve had.”*

*He didn’t say any more, but we’ve always been unusually communicative in a reserved way, and I understood that he meant a great deal more than that. In consequence, I’m inclined to reserve all judgments, a habit that has opened up many curious natures to me and also made me the victim of not a few veteran bores. (Chapter one).*

Now produce your own examples of different psychic distances. You could use the exam scenario again. Write it as an omniscient narrator, a closer third person narrator, then a really close third person narrator, inside the character’s head. Consider the effect of the different psychic distances.

**Voice.**

If you are trying to imitate the way a character speaks (as you would in first, second and close third person viewpoints), you need to consider their speech style. Here are some questions to ask yourself:

What are my character’s *idiolect* features? Do they have any verbal tics – such as when Gatsby calls people ‘old sport’ ?

What is their *register?* Do they use a lot of formal, sophisticated lexis (often of classical or French origin)? Or do they prefer down to earth, informal words (often of Old English or Norse origin)?

Do they use idiomatic or figurative language? Do they have any favourite sayings?

Do they speak a lot or very little? Do they waffle or get straight to the point?

Have another look at Nick’s voice at the beginning of *The Great Gatsby,* and analyse his speech style. Use the questions above to help you.

*In my younger and more vulnerable years my father gave me some advice that I’ve been turning over in my mind ever since.*

*“Whenever you feel like criticizing any one,” he told me, “just remember that all the people in this world haven’t had the advantages that you’ve had.”*

*He didn’t say any more, but we’ve always been unusually communicative in a reserved way, and I understood that he meant a great deal more than that. In consequence, I’m inclined to reserve all judgments, a habit that has opened up many curious natures to me and also made me the victim of not a few veteran bores. The abnormal mind is quick to detect and attach itself to this quality when it appears in a normal person, and so it came about that in college I was unjustly accused of being a politician, because I was privy to the secret griefs of wild, unknown men. Most of the confidences were unsought — frequently I have feigned sleep, preoccupation, or a hostile levity when I realized by some unmistakable sign that an intimate revelation was quivering on the horizon; for the intimate revelations of young men, or at least the terms in which they express them, are usually plagiaristic and marred by obvious suppressions. Reserving judgments is a matter of infinite hope. I am still a little afraid of missing something if I forget that, as my father snobbishly suggested, and I snobbishly repeat, a sense of the fundamental decencies is parcelled out unequally at birth.*

Now write a first, second or close third person narrative in which you create a distinctive voice. Like Nick at the beginning of *The Great Gatsby,* you could write about a character’s early life and attitudes. Swap with a neighbour and analyse the voices you have created, again using the questions above.