***View to a Who:* *Writing Fiction with Multiple Viewpoints***

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**When should a story use multiple viewpoints?**

* When the characters have distinct voices, personalities, interests, and motivations…especially if the characters are in conflict with one another.
* When the characters have differing perceptions of the same crucial events.
* When each of the viewpoint characters have their own story arc, within the larger story arc (and each of them has a role to play in advancing the plot).
* When the characters’ individual story arcs ultimately intersect with one another…and the resolution of the story couldn’t be achieved any other way.
* When the story is a novel. It is exceedingly rare to feature multiple viewpoints in a short story (and doing so successfully requires master level skills).

**What are the various ways to convey multiple viewpoints?**

* **Multiple** **first person POVs:** Every viewpoint character is “I.” “I” tells the story in the moment and is centrally involved in it. Only what the “I” knows, feels, perceives, thinks, guesses, hopes and remembers can be told, so the reader can identify strongly with the viewpoint character and cares about what happens to them. Used when *voice* is important—when *how* a story is told (in terms of style) is as important as *what* is told.

*Dramatic potential:*

* Each viewpoint creates great intimacy between reader and speaker and offers a fresh and engaging new voice.
* Often, one or more of the speakers are the only characters who have the answer to the central question of the story (or each viewpoint character possesses unique knowledge that adds up to the answer).

*Potential drawbacks:*

* Story will fall flat unless the voices are strong, dynamic or original enough and have “earned” the right to tell the story; conversely, voices that are overdone can be distracting or neglect the telling of the story itself.
* Understanding of the characters is limited to what each of the characters understands about themselves; the author can add no interpretation.
* Can be jarring to the reader to have to reset over and over again with a new “I”
* **Multiple third person POVs:** Each viewpoint character is “he,” “she,” or “they” (when the term refers to a single individual).

**Limited** (e.g., the building block of multiple third person POVs)**:** Tactically the same as first person, in that the POV is limited to one character’s perceptions, but uses a greater psychic distance between the reader and character than in a story told in first person—it puts readers close to (but not exactly *in*) a character’s brain. Can provide greater flexibility than first person, creating the space to explore tension or provide analysis, while offering much of the same trust-building advantages that the first person POV does. Easier on the reader psychologically when switching between characters.

**\*Alternating/Roving Limited:** Essentially the use of multiple third-person limited POVs (e.g., the most common way for using multiple viewpoints in a story) which shift within the same story or within the same section of a story. Helpful for stories in which intersecting actions or the knowledge of many creates the story’s ultimate meaning. Tension is created by what the characters don’t know about other characters. As noted earlier, easier to pull off in novels than in short fiction.

**Hybrid first/third person:** Switching between first and third person (consistently conveying certain characters in one mode and others in the other, in separate chapters) for specific stylistic reasons understood clearly by the author. Challenging to pull off, as it can be jarring for the reader to switch between the two modes within one story.

**Omniscient:** A narrator/narrative consciousness, which is *neither a character nor the author*, is the controlling intelligence of the story. Knows all, sees all, is aware of how the story will end. Very classical/old school. Usually better suited to novels rather than stories.

* *Dramatic potential*: Can create useful tension when the narrator knows more than the characters but the characters know more than the reader.
* *Potential drawback*: Tricky to handle with the right degree of nuance; requires the ability to simultaneously retain a “God’s-eye” consciousness, to slip in and out of various characters’ minds seamlessly, and to comment on the proceedings without taking on a personality.

**For what reason should the point of view switch in a story?**

* Because a scene or chapter has reached its conclusion (e.g., something has “happened,” thus changing the status quo). This signals that it’s time to move on to the next viewpoint.
* Because it leads to a deepening of the story’s conflict…thus advancing the plot.
* Because the switch to the other viewpoint provides a momentary diversion from, or a contrast to, the protagonist’s perspective.
* Because the switch gives us access to information that the new viewpoint character alone possesses (and which of course also advances the plot)
  + A potential pitfall: Beware of switching to another character’s viewpoint merely to explain a feeling or thought when the primary character has the ability to interpret, guess at, or project the other character’s thoughts and feelings.

**How do you switch viewpoints, from a technical standpoint?**

* Scene or chapter breaks provide a natural physical cue that prepares the reader not only for a shift to a slightly different time and place, but also for a viewpoint shift. A viewpoint switch here is usually clear because the character is usually named at the beginning of the new section.
* Alternating/roving third-person limited POVs that shift *within* chapters or scenes are much trickier to handle—and generally not for beginners. This approach relies on more subtle, but very quick, transitions—often grounded in a character’s thoughts or physical sensations—that make it clear whose consciousness we have briefly entered.

The key to success with alternate/roving: don’t let it devolve into “head hopping.” This is when the POV changes in an *unexpected*and *hard-to-decipher*way, without clear transitions or grounding in a character’s physical body, thus confusing us about whose perceptions we’re inside of and jolting us out of the story.

**Other considerations:**

* Equally weighted viewpoints vs. primary and supporting viewpoints.
* Am I using/focusing on the right viewpoints? Do I need all these viewpoints to begin with? Whose story is it really?
* How do you end a multiple viewpoint story?

**Exercises in using multiple points of view:**

1. Describe a pair of scissors on a table, in a room of your choosing, and whatever thoughts, memories or actions they elicit, from the point of view of *one* of the following characters: An escaped convict, an 84-year-old grandma, a little girl, or a nurse (refer to your character by their pronouns). Continue until something “happens”. Then insert a space break and continue the action from the viewpoint of one of the other characters, starting just before—or just as—they enter the room. Think about your **selection of detail**—what details of the room, table, and scissors would each character notice? What personal concerns does each character bring? How much time has elapsed between one scene and the next?
2. Next, let’s have some fun with an advanced technique: put all the above characters together at the same time in the same room, using a *quickly shifting third person alternating/roving point of view*. Don’t identify anyone’s age or background outright—instead, allow the reader to deduce them. How do the characters speak and act? What do the characters notice about each other? What judgments do they make about each other? What sort of moods are they in? Think about your **selection of event**—what actions do each of them take that provides the details the others notice?

[\*Technical tip: The following techniques can be helpful for shifting between different viewpoints in the same scene. Try varying your approaches. For example:

* Signal a new POV with a new paragraph.
* Use transitions at the beginning of a sentence that identify and shift to the new viewpoint character. Name names. (e.g., As for Jessica…)
* Ground the reader in a new POV by allowing the new viewpoint character to perform an action before speaking, *using sensory detail* about physical sensations that would come from that character’s POV. (e.g, Max retrieved the book from the floor. He felt his knee pop. “What I think,” he began, “is that….”)
* Ground the reader in a new POV by allowing the new viewpoint character to have a thought before speaking or continuing with an action. (What Vanessa wanted was to flee the room, right this minute. She turned back to the class.)
* Use a glance or a touch or a shared activity to signal who is about to pass the POV to whom: (He stared hard at Maxine.

Maxine wasn’t going to look at him. She felt herself roll her eyes.)