

Handling Viewpoint in Fiction Worksheet

This is the worksheet for October's seminar, which you can find in video, audio and transcript forms at: www.writershuddle.com/seminars/oct2013.

Viewpoint

The viewpoint (or point of view, or perspective) your story is told from is vital. It underpins everything you write and creates the tone and mood.

You can think of viewpoint as a camera: the reader looks through a character's eyes, or over their shoulder – or you can have wider, panning shots.

Your genre may constrain your viewpoint choices (e.g. romance novels aren't written from a detached, omniscient perspective).

First Person

This can be a great way to create a strong voice, and also allows for some experimentation with:

- Framing narratives (e.g. the narrator is telling the story to police).
- Unreliable narrators – misleading or lying to the reader.
- Unusual spellings or turns of phrase.

Caution: These techniques may annoy the reader if done badly. Some readers dislike first person in general and avoid novels that use it.

Third Person

The third-person perspective allows most of the closeness of first person (limited third person). You can also use the omniscient third person, where you might look a whole town – or at an unobserved inanimate object.

Be careful when switching viewpoints: it's best to do this at the end of a scene, rather than "head-hopping" between paragraphs.

Second Person

The second person is rarely used outside experimental short stories and novels (and “Choose Your Own Adventure” books). It’s hard for readers to read for sustained periods of time.

Bringing in Other Perspectives

If you want to bring in the perspective of a non-viewpoint character, try:

- Dialogue (*though people are rarely totally honest*).
- Letters or emails.
- Diary entries or blog posts.
- Mindreading or equivalent technology (*won't suit all novels!*)

Past Tense vs Present Tense

The past tense is more common, and often seen as the “natural” storytelling tense. It’s a safe choice and usually straightforward to write.

Present tense tends to be viewed as more literary. Although it’s more immediate in some respects, it can put off readers who aren’t used to it.

Be careful not to accidentally switch between tenses. You can change for different chapters (e.g. flashbacks) but don’t switch within a paragraph.

Exercise

Rewrite a section of your current work so that it uses a different viewpoint (e.g. switch first to third, or third person limited to third person omniscient). See what changes.

Discuss this seminar here:

www.writershuddle.com/forums/seminars/september-2013-getting-motivated-and-tackling-resistance