

Character Inner Thoughts: when to write them

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<http://greatstorybook.com/character-inner-thoughts-when-to-write-them/>

This entry is part 7 of 7 in the series [Characters with Character](#)

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This is about understanding Character Inner Thoughts and knowing when to write them. This is one way to give your characters greater characterization - which is essential to your story stuff. Without it, we just won't care.

If you want compelling characters with a real character arch, then you need to express their Inner Thoughts.

But what about “show don't tell?” Here's the scoop.

Artwork by Dong Nhut Tran.

Expressing a character's Inner Thoughts is the exact opposite of the whole “show don't tell” mantra and philosophy we hear from every corner. But still - we DO need those Inner Thoughts.

A description of me train traveling could be very boring indeed, because all I really do is sit quietly with my thoughts and look out the window. Most of what happens is all in my head. Yet I love trains, love train travel, and I love reading about train travel.

So how do we write a travelogue, or *anything at all really*, when the Good Stuff is all upstairs (in the mind)?

That brings me to one of the greatest writing problems: internal dialogue and inner thoughts. (I'll explain why this is a problem in a minute.)

Expressing a character's Inner Thoughts is one of the key ways you can and should build up strong characterizations for your characters. ([To read more about characterization, go HERE.](#))

Why Inner Thoughts = Problematic

You've all heard or read that we writers should "show and not tell." So you might wonder: what about the stuff that goes on inside a character's head? That's important. But there are no explosions there.

Is there a way to write inner thoughts that *feel* like action?

Quick answer: no. Not really.

However, there is a right way to do it so that we care, and that's what I want to really share with you.

There are absolutely times when you should slow down and give us more of the deep stuff, the thoughts that go unshared with anyone save for us, the quiet readers.

What You'll Get Here:

- The #1 Rule of Writing Inner Thoughts
- The #2 but Cooler Rule of Inner Thoughts
- When to express character thoughts (with examples)
 - Slow the Plot
 - Tell the Truth
 - Reveal Vulnerability
 - Heighten your Drama
 - Get Motivation Moving
 - Add Levity or Gravity
 - Polarize Characters

The #1 Rule of Writing Inner Thoughts

Only write the thoughts of the [Point-Of-View \(POV\) Character](#). Whoever is narrating can think aloud for us. If someone else's thoughts suddenly intervene within the narrator's narration, it will make no sense unless the POV character can read minds.

- If you write a [multiple or alternating POV](#), still keep the Inner Thoughts within the correlating POV narration. Don't let them overlap.
- If you write an [omnipotent POV](#), you can do whatever you want. Just know that this type of narration can be very tricky.

The #2 but *Cooler* Rule of Inner Thoughts

Only use Inner Thoughts if it does one or both of these two things:

1. Reveals something important about the character
2. Moves the plot forward

Do not reveal random Inner Thoughts that don't serve the story in any way. It will bore us. Trust me: I have all sorts of boring thoughts in my head, just like anyone.

While we do want our characters to feel real, we don't want to bore our readers. Only write down the best Inner Thoughts, the things that matter. (If you're not sure how to write details that matter, [read HERE: all about how to go from blah to awe.](#))

When to Express Character Thoughts

I'm going to break one of the biggest rules of blogging here and make up most of the writing examples. I know, this is opening myself to *all sorts* of crits and slams and the sort of, "How can I take advice from you when you're such a lame writer?" Remarks like that can happen.

But I'm doing it anyway! Fearless little blogger that I be. Ahem.

So come along with me and take a look at 7 reasons you want to Tell and NOT Show.

1. Slow the Plot

It isn't good to maintain a fast clip from beginning to end. Doing so makes a story exhausting at first, and downright boring later. The best thing to do is establish a more organic pace. The story should jump at the beginning, but it shouldn't be hopping all the way through.

There are times when you'll want to slow down and be more thoughtful, and expressing a character's Inner Thoughts is an ideal way to do this.

[Dialogue generally quickens the pace of a story.](#) **Inner thoughts slow it down.**

Here's an example of action that is slowed down just a bit for an Inner Thought, one that reveals something about our character and that moves the plot forward.

Paul's little knees buckled a little; just enough. He was too close to the metal cabinet. Janet ran across the room, her face stretched thin. He was falling. He was going to hit something, hard. In a giant leap-and-grab for her son's nappy, Janet's fleeting thought was something that would both haunt and shock her afterward. *Did I remember to turn off the stove?*

"When did saving my child from a cracked skull become something mundane?" Janet didn't really expect her friends to have an answer, but she certainly didn't expect the reaction she got.

2. Tell the Truth

Sometimes our characters might not want to say what ought to be said – or perhaps they cannot say the truth for some reason. If it strengthens the story to let your readers know how they really feel, you can do that with an Inner Thought reveal.

Here's an example. Something that might happen at a wedding reception. Just be sure there's a payoff, a reason for this moment to happen at all (in this case, Susan has to be an important character).

“Oh hi, Susan. So nice you could come.” *Guess invitations weren't necessary, since you didn't get one and came anyway.* “Maybe you can find a seat over there.” *On a tack.*

3. Reveal Vulnerability

You can give your character a sense of depth and multi-dimensionality by showing us what they hide from others, things like: sorrow, longing, determination – emotions that are difficult to display and easy to camouflage.

Longing for another person is absolutely everywhere in stories. It's maybe the most common emotional experience.

If he's been dating Meredith all this time, why did he take me out for an ice cream? She and I are nothing alike. We couldn't get more different without one of us being from Mars or something. Does he care or am I just another bit of chain? A notch. Whatever those are for. If only he didn't smell so good.

4. Heighten your Drama

At a climactic or extremely dramatic moment, you might interrupt action with your character's thoughts. It can, if done right, add tension to the scene.

“I called it off. It's over.” Shouldn't she *want* to believe me? Her face was unreadable. I crossed the room. I did it slowly. There was no way to be sure what she was going to do next, and that crystal vase was dangerously within her reach.

5. Get Motivation Moving

Motivation is usually something people don't openly chat about, so your protagonist probably won't either. Their motivations can be something you can express through Inner Thoughts.

Motivation reveals can be really powerful in thrillers and dramas particularly, but every character should have motivation. The 2-year-old is motivated to grab the toilet seat. Why? It wants to be higher. Your Inner Thoughts reveal doesn't need to be wordy. In fact, it can be just one word.

Higher! Higher!

That example is from a [chain storybook](#) I love called [Higher! Higher!](#) and these words absolutely *are* Inner Thoughts (and sometimes, on other pages, the same words are dialogue). No matter what, motivations tell us about who the character is deep down, and also *must make us want to read more*.

What's great about Inner Thoughts is that they can be layered and sly.

My mother never wanted me to be happy. Well, I'm just going to be as happy as a clam and I'll make her watch. "What do you want for dinner?" It was a simple enough question, just normal enough.

6. Add Levity or Gravity

My favorite use of Inner Thoughts is this: add a bit of self-ironic humor to lighten a serious situation. Likewise, you can add an internal seriousness to a scene that to outsiders might seem unextraordinary. This is contextual and gives your story a real sense of emotional depth.

I've often thought that if I didn't have so many words in my head, my mouth would be greatly improved. It would, for once, be still. "What do you mean you don't have time to pick up the laundry? How many times have you promised, have you told me you would help out with what's going on here? It's your house too, or maybe you forgot about that, about your promises and your home. No wonder I'm your third wife."

7. Polarize Characters

If you're using multiple POV or alternating POV, you can also play around with the idea of polarizing the Inner Thoughts of your different characters. This can be fun to play with, but just be sure the differences between the characters really serve their characters *and* the plot. (Rule #1, but magnified by 1000!)

I think one of the funniest and perhaps most obvious examples of this is in [He Said, She Said \(1991\)](#). It's a romantic comedy, and we first get to see events unfold from his perspective and then from hers. Where the POV varies is often quite hilarious.

What about you?

What is your favorite example of this kind of characterization? Give us a good quote and a title. If you're working on something right now and have a characterization question, you can share that here as well. Write below, let me know – or, as ever, send me an email.

Keep creating, no matter what.

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