

How to Write First Person Narrative

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This entry is part 1 of 7 in the series [Narrative](#)

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If you write fiction or non-fiction (so I guess that covers everything!), you need to know how to write first person narrative.

This is all about how to craft an amazing first person narrative in your story - all the tricks and subtle layers you can apply to this kind of narrator.

The types of narrative modes we can use (first, second, third, hybrid and alternating) are vastly multi-layered, so I want to tackle *just* first person for now.

Terminology Talk: the essentials & why it's confusing

Narrative is one of those words that is used both loosely and often to describe much of what a writer does. Narrative can be specifically the point of view from which we're told a story (often termed "the lens through which we see").

Narrative can also be synonymous with story – which means everything that a writer puts on paper!

Narrative Techniques is a term that broadly encompasses every trick a writer might use to keep and hold our attention: everything from the Big Stuff like plot and character, all the way down to the plethora of

very specific tricks like [alliteration](#) and [eucatastrophe](#).

Don't be confused by all this narrative chatter. To be clear, when we talk about *The Narrator* of a story, we just mean who is telling us the story.

Narrative Voice and **Narrative Point of View (POV)** do *not* mean the same thing, though they are often used interchangeably. Voice is really the form of the Point of View: stream of consciousness, epistolary, character narrative, etc. Narrative Voice is the *personality* of the narrator, regardless of the POV (though not all POVs can use all types of Voice).

What this means: when you establish a narrator for your story, you will need to pick a narrative voice and a narrative point of view. Not only that, you'll have other, finer tricks from which to choose. These refine and define your story and everything that happens in it. So I want to cover these with you.

- **Narrative Modes:** first person, second person, third person, hybrid and alternating.
- **Narrative Points of View:** the chosen character who narrates.
- **Narrative Voice:** the form of the story's delivery, such as epistolary, stream of consciousness, character voice, etc.
- **Narrative Techniques:** any trick a writer might use to tell a story (plot, [character](#), [bathos](#), [MacGuffin](#), etc.).

Let's get down to what exactly first person narrative is, what we can expect from this, and then from there get to the nitty gritty.

What you'll get here:

- 3 essential things to know about first person narrative.
- 6 types of first person narrators.
- 4 types of narrative voice you can apply to the first person narrative.

First Person Narrative: the 3 essentials

First person narrative is when we use "I" and "we" in a story. After third person ("he said, she said"), this is the most common form. What's important to remember here is that the first person narrator has to be three things:

- Unreliable
- Limited
- Direct

It isn't remotely possible for this type of narrator to know everything that happens to all of the characters. For beginning writers, this is sometimes forgotten, and the narrator ends up having access to far too much knowledge.

Unreliable

Anything the narrator says (to us readers) is tainted by the personality and perceptions of the narrator – which must be a fully-developed, round character. Consequently, we might not be able to always trust what the narrator believes is happening. Too, this type of narrator might in fact choose to lie to us, for some reason.

Limited

This type of narrator cannot know everything, cannot be everywhere. So it could well happen that the first person narrator wasn't even present at an important plot point. Maybe they only have a second-hand or third-hand account! Too, they should be naturally limited just in general, having certain tasks they don't do that well, biases, and other character imperfections.

Direct

This is when the narrator says quite simply how (they believe) things are. If a character is an idiot and the narrator tells us this quite frankly and in those words, that is a direct characterization (the opposite of indirect characterization, which a first person narrator cannot be). In first person, we have to keep reading to determine whether the statement is true or not. (Because the narrator is also unreliable, biased, limited, etc.)

How far removed you want your narrator to be from what's happening in the story is up to you, and this is largely a matter of which character you'll choose to be the narrator. So let's bang those out right now.

Narrative (first person) Characters

There are six [types of characters](#) you can choose to narrate in the first person. These types can sometimes overlap (double-duty), but they needn't, so it's important to list them out separately. Here they are:

- protagonist
- side-kick
- side character
- omniscient
- dead
- author surrogate

Protagonist (a.k.a. central narration)

The [main character](#) can perhaps most easily be the first person narrator, because if the story is about them and their decisions, they'll be present for all the important plot points. Make sure your protagonist is flawed and that those flaws are revealed in their narrative tone.

Side-Kick or Best Friend

The most famous example of this kind of first person narrator is Dr. Watson, Sherlock Holmes' trusted

friend and comrade. He's there for most of the important action, but he doesn't always understand what is happening or why.

This kind of narrator, because of their closeness to the protagonist, can provide insights and observations (biased as they are) about the protagonist that no one else might perceive. This can add a great deal of depth in our understanding and sympathy for the protagonist.

Side Character or Peripheral Character

A character not really involved in the story at all could also tell us a story. This happens all the time in real life, and doing so on paper, in a well-crafted story, can be a very compelling way to tell a story. In the end, it will be one that we (readers) wish we could know more about.

You can use this kind of narration when you want to capture a greater sense of mystery in your story, and when you're certain that you don't want all the questions answered for your readers.

Omniscient

This is a tricky one. Don't get this confused with the third person omniscient. The first person omniscient narrator is one whose innermost thoughts are somehow accessible to us – without that narrator knowing about it.

It's as if we have become mind readers to this particular character, and they are totally unaware of us. I've long felt this was a misnomer for this kind of narrator, but there it is, as it is: the omniscient first person narrator.

Dead

The first person narrator can be dead. That means that they can also overlap to be any of these above options (protagonist, side-kick, side character, omniscient). In general, this would be a spirit or ghost that cannot affect the physical world.

The dead first person narrator cannot be one of the undead monster types (zombies, vampires), because those types of characters can speak to and directly impact the living.

If you choose this route, be sure to outline very strict rules about how limited your narrator is:

- What are their perception limitations?
- What are their weaknesses or flaws?

This won't just influence the plot; it will directly impact the nature of their narration.

Author Surrogate

An author surrogate is the author inserted into the story as a character. It's essentially the author (either

fictionalized or real), roaming around on the page, interacting with the other characters.

When the author surrogate is also the first person narrator, the sky is the limit here in terms of what you can do. You can imagine yourself as being part of the action, or not.

As the author, you can put yourself into any of these roles:

- Protagonist
- Side-kick
- Side character
- Omniscient (Really tricky!)

These are the types of characters you can choose to tell a story in first person. Now let's discuss narrative voice, the method we can get the story from them.

Narrative Voice

There are four types of narrative voice that we can apply to first person narrative. They are:

- Character Voice
- Autobiographical Fiction
- Epistolary
- Stream of Consciousness

Character Voice

Character Voice is simply what we would consider “normal” narrative voice of a character (protagonist, side-kick, etc.). It's when we're simply reading a book and the narration is written from the point of view of a certain character in first person. Simple.

Autobiographical Fiction

I love this term. You see this and have no idea how much of the story is true. It must be about the author's experience in some manner.

In [Life of Pi](#), the author establishes himself as the first person narrator who was told the story of Pi second-hand. He had nothing to do with the story; he is the biased personal narrator telling someone else's story. So it's his narrated autobiographical fiction framing another autobiographical fiction story (where Pi, the protagonist, also narrates in first person).

Epistolary

Epistolary is a fancy word for “of letters” (as Fancy Nancy might say). In narrative voice, it means that personal letters, found items (like maps, tickets, etc.) and personal diary entries are what the reader gets their hands on – somehow.

The [Griffin and Sabine Trilogy](#) is a perfect example of this. So is [“S.” the book project conceived by film director J. J. Abrams and written by Doug Dorst](#). In both of these examples, the narrative point of view does change from first person to second person, when the characters discover each other. This is an important turning point in the plots and affects how and what the writers (who know nothing of us) write and do.

Stream of Consciousness

Stream of consciousness is when we read the essential, seemingly unedited internal ramblings of the narrator. This is an internal monologue, but it's also fragmented and often takes giant leaps into seemingly unrelated territory.

This kind of narrative voice can be applied to any narrative POV (first, second, third, etc.). It is generally thought to be a more dreamlike tack on writing, where it may take a long while for the reader to discover what is real and what is imagined.

If you want the reader to really distrust the narrator, this is probably your best choice.

Sentence fragments can be utilized in this kind of voice. Think of it as the fluid internal thoughts of the narrator. In first person narration, the stream of consciousness will feel almost observatory, as if the narrator isn't participating in their own experience.

I wouldn't use this if you want the reader to feel secure about the future of the narrator or anything happening in the story (or during the stretches where the applied narrative voice is stream of consciousness).

Getting the Simplicity (under all the STUFF)

Writing is difficult. Learning to write well is more difficult. It's my hope that I can break down all the tools you need to write a great story that can reach through and get down to the wonderful simplicity that makes a story move us, change us.

I'll be tackling all the other aspects of narrative and how you can use those to Best Effect in your writing. If you have questions, send them my way. I always like getting your emails and will respond as quickly as possible.

So don't be shy. What are your woes and worries as a writer? Write below; let me know. Or send me an email.

Keep creating, no matter what.

This entry is part of the series

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[How to Write Second Person Narrative >>](#)
