

How to Write Second Person Narrative

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<http://greatstorybook.com/second-person-narrative/>

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Second Person Narrative is when we say, “you” in a text. When might you want to use this kind of narrative and HOW can you hone this so that it really engages the reader?

That’s what I want to get down right now, blow-by-blow.

This is bumpy territory, so you might want to print this out.

One of the most confusing things about Second Person Narrative and understanding exactly what that means: many people use this term interchangeably with Second Person Narrative Point of View, which is completely different and very specific.

What You’ll Get Here:

- The 5 essential things to decide about Narrative – a complete, visual breakdown.
- Where we typically find Second Person Narrative.
- **2 Types of Second Person POV. (This single decision has the most staggering affect!)**
- 4 Types of Narrative Voice you can apply to this narrative mode.

- 5 Narrative Techniques you can use to enhance this narrative mode.

To help get a better understanding of all the narrative terms, I decided to create a visual. This is how you can visualize Narrative:

Narrative Techniques: the overarching, generalized term that describes all sorts of things writers need to do, such as: character, plot, *narration*, etc.

So we're grabbing the *third option*, Narration, and breaking that down further, into: Narrative Characteristics (which directly influence all the other aspects of Narrative) and then Narrative Mode, POV, Time and Voice.

So when you build your narrator, you'll need to determine these 5 things:

- **Narrative Characteristics**
 - Reliable or Unreliable?
 - Limited or Unlimited?
 - Direct or Indirect?
- **Narrative Mode**
 - 1st Person
 - 2nd Person
 - 3rd Person
 - Alternating
 - Hybrid
- **Narrative Point of View**
 - Omniscient
 - Central Character
 - Peripheral Character
 - Author Surrogate
 - Dead
- **Narrative Voice**
 - Character
 - Stream of Consciousness
 - Epistolary
 - Autobiographical Fiction
- **Narrative Time**
 - Past
 - Present
 - Future

NOTE: All of the terms listed above are specific writing terms with particular uses. (Example: You will not find "direct" in a regular dictionary for this particular use, because this is a specific type of narrative

characteristic.)

Let's pin down what second person narrative is, when and how to use it, and then to the more detailed ways you can play with and hone this narrative type using certain techniques.

Where we get 2nd Person Narrative

In terms of communicating, **second person mode** is used all the time.

Advertisers use second person almost exclusively.

- Think different. (Apple – in this case, the “you” is understood.)
- It's your world. Take control. (AMX)
- Your vision. Our future. (Olympus)
- Just do it. (Nike)
- When you care enough to send the very best. (Hallmark)
- Can you hear me now? Good. (Verizon)

We hear second person all the time in songs.

“You don't own me. Don't try to change me in any way.”

“When you wish upon a star, makes no difference who you are.”

And anything with ooh-oooh Baby... is also in second person.

In speeches.

Presidents speak to their constituents in second person: “My fellow Americans, ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country.” –John F. Kennedy

Other usual suspects include:

- Self-help Books
- Guide Books
- Do-It-Yourself Books (even the genre name is in second person)
- Blogs (like this one)

Not to be confused with Second Person POV!

IMPORTANT NOTE: Second Person POV in a fictionalized story is something quite different, and very special. *Of all the types of narrative, it is the least used.* Second Person POV is hard to write, because it means that “you” become the protagonist and the narrator is an omnipotent being reporting to “you” or instructing “you” or prompting “you” through certain actions and emotions. (All the details on this POV are below... keep reading!)

Examples where Second Person POV are traditionally used:

- Interactive Fiction (like the Choose Your Own Adventure books)
- Role-Playing Games

If you're looking for an illustrated storybook in second person, perhaps the best known example would have to be "[If You Give A Mouse A Cookie](#)" by [Laura Numeroff](#) and [Felicia Bond](#). The duo has created an entire series of similar stories, all of them in second person. (You might want to check out their [Mouse Cookie Books](#) interactive games and activities.)

My personal favorite is [If You Give A Pig A Pancake](#), mostly because of the tree house. What makes this series more accessible is that it's hypothetical. "If you do this... if you do that... you'll probably have to..." So there's a comfortable leeway given to "you."

In other, typically more adult narratives in this POV style, "you" are not given a choice. The action is happening to and with you, whether you would actually do any of it or not. For some readers, this can be extremely off-putting, especially if the protagonist is rude, crass, uneducated, immoral, and generally the type of non-hero most people don't want to be.

The most successful ways to create that comfortable leeway for adults is in a gaming or choose your adventure format.

Second Person Narrative: the 3 essentials

There are three basic attributes a second person narrator has. They are:

- Reliable
- Unlimited
- Direct or Indirect (you must choose)

Reliable

Unlike first person, second person narrators have to be reliable. They cannot lead us astray or give us false information. Doing so wouldn't just confuse the reader; it would completely derail the story. This is a narrative voice that readers should be able to trust, unquestionably.

Unlimited

Because the narrator knows absolutely everything of the story, what the narrator knows has no limits. The fictionalized character of "you" is certainly limited, but "you" are not the actual narrator. A greater being of some sort is placing you in their sights of what is happening.

Direct or Indirect

Direct narrative is when the narrator expresses things in a biased way. (Example: "Mr. Smith, the foul

smelling bigot, wants your money right now.”) Indirect narrative is unbiased, letting the reader determine the type of character Mr. Smith might be. (Example: “Mr. Smith says he wants your money, ‘immediately and with no delays whatsoever!’”)

Second Person Narrative can be either, without any problem. However, given that the point of choosing this particular kind of narrative POV is to pull the reader directly into the story, a Direct Narrative style is very often best.

The potential drawback of using second person narrative POV is that if you choose an indirect style, that pushes the reader further away from the story. The reader will already be primed to push away (because we tend to have a strong sense of Me), so do what you can to pull down the walls.

However, an indirect style is perfect if you want the reader to figure out what truths “you” need to discover (most often, about who “you” are). Doing this can double as a terrific way to accomplish defamiliarization (more on that below).

What Characters Speak in Second Person Narrative

Second person narrative is when we use “you.” But one of the reasons this is so misunderstood (and confusing) is because of the wild variance that happens when we simply apply a particular Point of View. These POV narrative layers have an impact on second person narrative more than in any other kind of narrative mode.

There are ONLY TWO possible characters to use for second person narrative. But these particular two are vastly different from each other, and they drastically alter everything about every word you would write... even though both implement second person.

The Writer

Most of the time, second person narrative is simply whoever it is that has written, said or sung the words. This is a very direct, personal form of narration. In non-fiction, the narrator is the author, directly. Not an Author Surrogate, which we can create with first person or third.

When we speak or write more casually, using “you” is quite natural and easy, because it feels like a simple conversation.

For fiction, it essentially places the reader directly in the action as *another central character* (where the writer is the protagonist, and “you” are another central character). In non-fiction, it places the reader (or listener) directly into the topic we’re teaching or sharing.

Omniscient

Second Person POV in fiction is omniscient and speaking directly to the listener, “you,” as you presumably do all the things “you,” the character in the story, are doing. This is an authoritative voice from a point of view that knows and sees everything, whether you want them to or not.

In games, this has to be. The Game Master is the one person who determines what exists and what is possible in that game-storyline.

To be clear: the “Second Person POV” is where the main character is “you” - but “you” are absolutely not the narrator. The Point of View is omniscient.

Narrative Techniques: the best for 2nd person

There are all sorts of narrative techniques, but there are five that you can use to great effect when writing in this kind of narrative.

- MacGuffin
- Narrative Hook
- Defamiliarization
- Hyperbole
- Bathos

The MacGuffin

The MacGuffin is whatever we feel to be “the real story.” For example, in many action adventures, there is some great prize to be sought. But what engages our interest is probably something else entirely, like the romantic interest. That is typically The MacGuffin (a term coined first by Alfred Hitchcock).

Incorporating a MacGuffin into a second person POV is a fun way to hint at the things that are most important to “you,” the character who probably does some self-defeating things along the way.

Narrative Hook

The narrative hook is some line of text that draws the reader’s attention immediately. In non-fiction, this is usually a startling fact or statistic that grabs our attention. “Did you know that...” openings can be very effective hooks.

In fiction, this can be any kind of sentence or two that pulls us into the story. Jumping into the deep end type of stuff. In second person narrative, the fact that the story exists at all is already a hook, but you’ve got to be intentional with it. Make the first couple of sentences really POW your readers. For more detail on how to hook readers, [go HERE](#).

Defamiliarization

This is the technique you use when you want to throw the reader off balance and make them see something in a new light. It’s when you take the ordinary and make it something new and amazing for us.

Poetry is where we see this the most, but a second person narrative is a primed scenario for this too. When you are able to take a dusty old, everyday type of thing and write about it in such a way that it seems fresh and new, that is defamiliarization.

Example: You watch the bird slam once again into the over-large window, feeling helpless. You wish so badly you could help it escape, but it is too frantic, too fast. There is no way for you to help it get back outside. The poor creature once again slams into the window, and this time, it knocks itself unconscious. Finally, you are able to pick it up and carry it to safety, outside, where it belongs. You place it on the ground. You nudge it. The bird opens its eyes, gives you a blink, and flies away. You watch the bird, and realize it is just like you. You have been slamming into an invisible wall, over and over. You need to get out.

Hyperbole

Hyperbole is exaggeration in writing. (We writers get fancier words than talkers.) “And you know, right down to the deepest corner of your soul, that if you have to hear that ridiculous song again you will simply die!” That’s hyperbole in second person POV.

If you want to play with the kinds of ridiculous emotions people do say they have, then hyperbole can be fun in Second Person POV.

Bathos

I’m especially partial to the application of bathos. This is when a writer begins with beautiful, or even occasionally scientific language that is essentially highfalutin (read: upstart snobby) – and then quickly deteriorates into real simple stuff. Like that. You go from the sublime and philosophical to the trivial and ridiculous.

NOTE: Don’t confuse Bathos with Pathos. Pathos is when we are made to feel sympathy. If something evokes a sense of Pathos, then it makes us feel a greater sense of sympathy for a character.

Bathos Example in dialogue:

“We used to have something that was pure and wonderful and good. What’s happened to it?”

“You spent it all.” –Monty Python

4 Types of 2nd Person Narrative Voice

There are four essential types of Narrative Voice you can use with Second Person Narrative. Narrative Voice is essentially the form of your story. For Second Person Narratives, you can choose from these forms:

- Character
- Stream of Consciousness
- Epistolary
- Autobiographical Fiction

Character

This is just the aspect of choosing the character, and in second person narrative it has to be either the

Writer or the Omniscient (see above).

Stream of Consciousness

This, I should think, would generally be nightmarish stuff. Choppy and uninviting. Sentence fragments can be utilized in this kind of voice. Think of it as the fluid internal thoughts of the narrator. In second person narration, the stream of consciousness will feel as if “you” aren’t a willing participant of your own experience.

I wouldn’t use this if you want the reader to feel secure about what will happen to “you.”

Epistolary

Epistolary is “of letters” or found items. Maps, tickets, letters and the like. Second person narrative is absolutely common in epistolary fiction. Where it separates from the rest of this is in your chosen Point of View.

Either the reader should feel that they have written these letters and notes, or not.

- If it’s someone else, no problem.
- If it is actually the POV of “you,” that will be very difficult to successfully do.

But it is possible. What you’d probably have to do first is to use the traditional character voice to establish the narrative, and then add epistolary voice as a bonus detail. (Example: So you wrote your girlfriend a quick note: “Linnie, I’m sorry.” You pinned it on her favorite dress. That way, you’re sure she won’t overlook it this time.)

Autobiographical Fiction

It’s actually been done. [Neil Patrick Harris has written his own Choose Your Own Adventure Autobiography](#). (I think he only did it because someone told him it was impossible.)

What to TAKE from all this

The more techniques you really understand about writing, the stronger your writing can be. That’s essential to banging out quality stories that readers can’t wait to read. It’s exactly what you need if you’re serious about capturing the attention of an agent.

Narrative is one of those absolutely vital aspects of writing that is often overlooked. It’s overlooked because it’s taken for granted. We read and hear narrative every day without giving it much thought. But if you can craft narrative and really know what it is you’re doing and why, you’ll be able to take your writing to a whole new level.

You’ll be able to create and re-create high quality writing on purpose, because you’ll know, and not just sense (with fingers crossed), what you’re doing.

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What are you working on right now? Write below, let me know – or, just send me an email. I love getting those.

Keep creating, no matter what.

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