Point of View and Voice
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NOTE: Everything printed in black is important. Please read it carefully!
WARNING: Do not read anything printed in red. Messages in red are NOT important!

“Point of view” and “voice” mean different things to different people. What we’re talking about to day, I think, is a rather specialized sense of these terms. Narrative point of view and narrative voice, which get a lot of attention from literary critics and fiction writers, but not so much from journalists.

To arrive at a narrative, I think we have to start with a list of questions. Here’s mine. I don’t ask them out loud, but I’ll need to know the answers sooner or later.

• Why am I writing?
• What is my topic?
• Who is my reader?
• Who am I, for this topic and this reader?

Oh goody, a list with bullets.
First, why. Why do we write? To get paid. Duh...
What are we trying to accomplish?
Vladimir Nabokov [Lectures on Literature (Harcourt Brace, 1982)] has said that literature has three purposes:

The obligatory authority. A dead Russian.
• inform
• educate
• enchant
inform, educate, and what?

These aren’t mutually exclusive, he says. Some writers enchant, inform, and educate all at once. But the highest purpose, according to Nabokov, is to enchant.

Get real. We’re not in the literature business. On a good day, we inform. Sometimes, we even try to educate. Enchant? That’s not our job.

We know about the influence of fiction writing on journalism. Tom Wolfe, Truman Capote, and the New Journalism, etc., etc. We take it for granted. It’s a little harder to detect the influence of television and advertising. But it’s there, especially in the “lifestyle” section: lots of punchy sentence fragments, direct address (speaking to a “you”), the clever play on words, the abrupt shifts in description that mimic changes in focal point or camera angle, and the quick intercutting of action, dialogue, and setting.

So... the people writing fiction are trying to enchant. And the people selling perfume and cars and basketball shoes are trying to enchant. And the forms they use influence journalists, and they influence us. But what about readers?

What do readers want?
Readers want pictures. Lots of pretty pictures.

A small percentage of the population will read to be informed. A few noble souls will read to be educated. But almost everyone will read to be enchanted. We want to be swept up in something new and strange and seductive and risky and mysterious. That’s why advertisers and book publishers put their money on enchantment. Why shouldn’t we?

That’s not our job. It costs too much. The boss says no.

Maybe you’re thinking, That’s not my job. Whose job is it?

Who in the world is in charge of enchantment?

Point of View vs. Grammatical Person
When I taught fiction writing, my students worried a lot about point of view. Should I write in first person? Or should I write in third?

I asked them to separate issues of point of view from the grammatical function of person (first person, third person), which, after all, is mostly a matter of pronouns.

Perhaps they’re right to be worried. But that’s not exactly the kind of voice we are talking about today. We are talking about narrative voice, the kind we use to tell a story. And we are talking about the storyteller’s use of point of view. These techniques are not for the common run of worldly discourse. They are reserved for stories, for enchantment.

Sure, most any reporter can slap together a feature lead that tries to take wing, as a story does. But most of these leads are tethered to the same old creepy choo-choo trains of facts and quotes, riding the same old rusty rails. Plain newswriting gussied up with the trappings of fiction is counterfeit, like faux stone on a mobile home, and good readers know it.

If we promise enchantment, we’ll have to deliver something more than information. We’ll have to spin what John Gardner called “the vivid and continuous dream.”

Dream on.

Without voice and point of view, there is no vivid and continuous dream.
First person (I or we did it), second person (you did it), third person (he or she or they did it).

I told my students that person doesn’t matter much. Point of view matters most of all. It governs everything in the story. Readers need to know who is telling a story and why. This is the way we interpret meaning, by understanding how the material of the story is filtered through a particular set of sensibilities.

Very early in a story, the writer signals to the reader what the point of view will be. Once given, this signal constitutes a sort of contract between author and reader. Readers orient themselves using the point of view. They float along on a stream of verbal signals issuing from a single consciousness, a coherent persona. If the writer violates the contract, the reader wakes up. The spell is broken. The dream is over.

Example of a shift in POV:

Brenda crossed the stage and turned to face the audience. They were shadowy and silent, beyond the footlights. The microphone was too high. She tried to lower it, twisting the cold, metal bands of the gooseneck in her fingers, but her elbow jarred the stack of pages she’d laid on the podium. Her notes fluttered off like wild leaves on the stage. But nobody laughed. Most of the crowd felt embarrassment for her. Brenda didn’t know what to do. Should she chase after the pages? Could she speak without notes?

Where is the shift in point of view? Definitely the shift occurs with “most of the crowd felt embarrassment for her.” And some of us may feel the shift as early as “nobody laughed.” The shift causes such a disruption that the writer needs a clumsy, mechanical transition (“Brenda didn’t know what to do”) to get us back to Brenda’s head. Readers may not consciously detect this kind of shift as they would, say, a misspelled word. But they will stub a toe on it, feel the spell break. The writer’s authority erodes.

Limited-Omniscient Point of View

This is the most common point of view in the short story, and it shows up frequently in fiction-style feature writing. The author can see events objectively and also has access to the mind of one character, but not to other minds or explicit powers of judgment. That is, the narrator doesn’t pass judgment or tell us what to think.

Within the limited-omniscient point of view, a writer takes the reader closer to or farther away from character’s sensibilities. This distance between the reader and the mind of the character has been called “psychic distance.”

The easiest way to talk about this is to use some examples.

Oh boy. A test.

Psychic Distance: an exercise

Number these examples 1 through 4, in order of increasing psychic distance.

A. Winter came early that year, and by late November the town lay under a low sky, heavy and gray as cast-iron. One evening, a tall, knobby man stepped out of the First National Bank, pulling the collar of his overcoat tighter around him, and set off in a blinding swirl of snow.

B. Snow. Filling his eyes. Stinging his cheeks. Cold he could taste like a grit in his teeth.

C. One evening in late November, Ralph Maynard stepped out of the First National Bank, pulled the collar of his overcoat tighter around him, and set off in a blinding swirl of snow.

D. As he left the warm, solemn glow of the bank and stepped outside, Ralph felt the snow swarm around him, biting his face.

Who will volunteer the answers? How many of you agree? This point-of-view stuff isn’t just a matter of opinion, varying from reader to reader.

We are very sensitive to clues about psychic distance. This is part of our aptitude as social animals. Where are the clues, in these examples? The character himself probably would not be thinking, at this moment in the story, about the actual name of the bank, or the month, or about his own height and knobbliness. These are details supplied by an observer. The more closely the narrative corresponds to the experience of the character, the less the psychic distance.

To see what effect grammatical person has on these examples, substitute first person for third in the phrases that name or describe the character.

Third to First*

Snow. Filling my eyes. Stinging my cheeks. Cold I can taste like a grit in my teeth.

As I left the warm, solemn glow of the bank and stepped outside, I felt the snow swarm around me, biting my face.

*Score it 5-3: a put-out at first and an assist for the third baseman.

Movement

Usually, a narrative moves from the outside inward within a scene (one unbroken sequence of action), or within some other structural unit:

It was ten-o’clock on the evening of the same day, and the permanent residents of the household on the mountain were restored to routines and sobriety. Jane, on the other hand, sat by herself in the kitchen, a glass of Scotch before her on the cleanly wiped table, going deeper and deeper into a mood she could recognize only as unfamiliar. She could not describe it; it was both frightening and satisfying. It was like letting go and being taken somewhere. She tried to trace it back. When, exactly, had it started?

—Gail Godwin, The Odd Woman

From a distance, we observe the “permanent residents of the household on the mountain.” But then the lens zooms in on Jane, sitting alone in the kitchen. The focus moves closer, to the glass of Scotch, and then, very smoothly, we begin to share her field of vision, seeing the cleanly wiped table, going deeper and deeper into a mood, “When, exactly, had it started?”

Once we are in the character’s head, the writer usually needs a structural break (typically, a change in time), to pull away again.

Objective Third

One version of the limited-omniscient point of view is something called the “Objective Third.” Over the last couple of decades, the stories of Raymond Carver have made the Objective Third something of a standard in creative writing workshops. In Objective Third, the POV may be close to more than one character. Usually the writer avoids confusion and awkward shifts by never moving all the way inside any character’s head.

The idea is to simulate something like clinical objectivity, to present events as though through a neutral lens. Of course, there is no such thing as pure objectivity in prose or anything else. In the Objec-
tive. Third, the writer's goal is to manage the reader's responses without seeming to. Carver didn't invent this point of view. Hemingway used it, too.

Here's an example:

The American and the girl with him sat at a table in the shade, outside the building. It was very hot and the express from Barcelona would come in forty minutes. It stopped at this junction for two minutes and went on to Madrid.

“What should we drink?” the girl asked. She has taken off her hat and put it on the table.

“It's pretty hot,” the man said.

“Let's drink beer.”

“Dos cervezas,” the man said into the curtain.

“Big ones?” a woman asked from the doorway.

“Yes. Two big ones.”

The woman brought two glasses of beer and two felt pads. She put the felt pads and the beer glasses on the table and looked at the man and the girl. The girl was looking off at the line of hills. They were white in the sun and the country was brown and dry.

—from Hemingway’s “Hills Like White Elephants”

Booze again. Somebody give this guy a drink.

If you remember the excerpt from Gail Godwin, you'll see similarities in the use of point of view. The reader moves from a distance (observations about the weather and train schedule) toward the characters, using the girl's hat and then a glass on a table to move in close. We are now close enough to see those felt pads from a point of view very close to the characters. Hemingway uses them to cue emotion. There is no unintended repetition in a Hemingway story.

First Person

Unless I am writing an essay, or something like it, the first person point of view establishes “I” as a character in the story. If “I” actually has something to do in the story, or if something significant happens to “I,” then “I” belongs. If not, “I” will just be hanging out to observe the real characters and what happens around them.

Does the use of “I” make the reader feel closer to the story? Maybe, but not necessarily. When I write a story in first person, I create a character for myself. Readers know this. In fact, readers are accustomed to looking for the discrepancy between what “I” says and what the author intends, because writers use that discrepancy to generate irony or humor. So if I write in first person, the reader must not only track my motivation as a writer, he or she must also track my motivation as a character. And no matter how honest I am as a writer, those motivations are never exactly the same.

Let's say you read a story that begins:

“I have it with love. No more. No way. No how.”

You immediately suspect that the writer knows better, and that the character's next true love is just a page or two away.

Essays, and essay-like articles with a narrative structure, are somewhat different. In these, I the writer am presenting my own line of reasoning, expressing my own understanding. Here's an example from Discover:

Not long ago, I camped in what seemed like one of the perfect places on Earth, at the edge of a stand of trees overlooking a floodplain... It might have been 100,000 years ago, when our ancestors were hunter-gatherers. It might have been millions of years ago, when we were apes.

It felt like home, and the biologist I was visiting suggested that perhaps our evolution in a landscape like this had shaped much more than the way our hips articulate or our hands grasp. Maybe evolution influences what we like, he said...

The idea that there might be a natural history of aesthetics turned out, when I got home and began to read, to be more that idle campfire talk...

—"The Natural History of Art," by Richard Conniff, Discover, November 1999, 94-101

The story elements here establish a motive for the essay: The writer's experience inspires the reading and interviewing that inspire the text. The writer, not any of his sources, is the central figure.

Second Person and Omniscient

I should mention two other categories of point of view: Second person, which is rare, and Omniscient. Second person is not the same as direct address, even though both of them use “you.”

Direct address is common in letters and instruction manuals. In the latter, “you” is understood: “Insert tab A into slot B.” Direct address also turns up in feature stories, especially if they have an instructive, how-to approach: “If you've ever wondered how to score big in the stock market, here's the secret.”

But true second person is something else entirely. In second person “You” is the central character:

“You descend the stairs slowly, knowing what waits below. It is dark. You reach for the light. Suddenly, you...”

Scream!

Unless you're writing parody or comedy, it is very difficult to manage second-person narratives without making them seem trivial, self-conscious, or overwrought. The repetition of “you” keeps dumping us back into our own skins. It's disconcerting, and too easy to think, “I would never do that!”

Omniscient

The other main category of point of view is my personal favorite: the omniscient, in which the writer knows all, can enter any character's head.

Like bosses.

During our lifetimes, this point of view generally has been considered passe. One reason is that literature has moved downward in class from the heroic to common characters, inward from action to the mind. Another reason is that we have all bought into the notion that we really can't know much of anything outside our own direct experience. The modern rule for writers has been “Write only what you know firsthand.” Since writers typically lead boring, solitary lives, the result has been a lot of meager, introspective prose. I happen to think that a willingness to face ignorance head on, and then struggle to dispel it, makes for good writing.

Fortunately for us, we're not paid to fret over modern neuroses or domestic minutia. We are writing about solar systems, the spin of atoms, the mysteries of DNA. I think our best science writers, John McPhee among them, are showing us how to rehabilitate the omniscient point of view.

Voice

The McPhee selection in your handout is not just an example of the omniscient or near-omniscient point of view. It makes a pretty good text for a discussion of voice.

When we talk about narrative voice, we're really talking about a pattern of verbal signals that convey to the reader a dis-
tinct and consistent personality.

If this personality is boring or incompetent, nobody will endure it. The personality behind the voice must be interesting.

If I felt like it, I could be seductive, candid and funny, odd and intriguing, sassy and impertinent, elegant and cool, etc. etc.

Your voice is you, in a particular frame of mind, playing a role, projecting a persona. You select only the diction and the inflection that fit this role. This is relatively easy, if you really and truly believe in the role you enact. Every choice you make, right down to the punctuation and the he saids/she saids, must ring true to this voice.

If we were going to dissect a writer’s voice, and point to its salient properties, here are some of the features we’d have to consider:

• The vocabulary (the verbal palette, intentionally narrow or broad)
• The frame of reference (knowledge and experience)
• The organization of rhythms and sounds
• The sensory mix (visual, verbal, tactile, auditory, olfactory)
• The attitude or tone (humble or bold, mild or aggressive, collegial or pedantic, etc.)
• The degree of authority (On what grounds do you claim the reader’s attention?)
• Quirks of personality (verbal tics, habits of style)
• The implied ethos (a characteristic manner of holding and expressing ideas, including the writer’s morality and his or her basic assumptions)

Now look at the McPhee piece. He establishes each dimension of his voice in the first few paragraphs. His vocabulary will be expansive, with words big and little, old and new, common and exotic. Bestrewn and asparkle and goodness knows. Pyroxene and xenolith. His reference will encompass not only the whole of geology but also particle physics and the nitty gritty of truck drivings and single-jack sledgehammers. He lays down a vivid texture of sensory signals—wind booms and raisin bread and needles in the ears. He respects his topic and his main character, the geologist, and honors her work. But he does so as an equal, without gushing or patronizing. And she is not merely a geologist. She is a woman, with far-flung ancestors and bright Norwegian hair. McPhee manages all of this with a command, an authority so complete that we are willing to hang out with him, enchanted, even if we feel a bit lost in the dream, now and then.

He breaks the rules. He uses the passive voice. He uses words nobody knows except McPhee and his geology buddies. He dares to declare something “beautiful” by his judgment alone. And many of his sentences are so long they set off green alarms in Microsoft Word.

John McPhee offers us the company of earnest, intelligent people, and he doesn’t dumb them down for us. He writes like a grownup, but one who retains a child’s capacity for curiosity and delight. He knows the rules and conventions, but he also knows when they’re just in the way, like training wheels on a bike. He has taken off the training wheels.

Let’s wind this down.

I’ll admit that John McPhee is a special case, an extreme case. He writes big books, and we write little articles. But his work contains the elements of voice and the ambition and nerve required to achieve it. If we want a voice, and if we’d like to use it to enchant our readers, we will have to have some of John McPhee’s gall, the strength of ego to acknowledge our ignorance and yet write our way past it. We have to believe ourselves equal to our sources, our topics, and our readers.

Excerpt from *Annals of the Former World* by John McPhee. Published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux June 1998; From Book 1: Basin and Range:

The poles of the earth have wandered. The equator has apparently moved. The continents, perched on their plates, are thought to have been carried so very far and to be going in so many directions that it seems an act of almost pure hubris to assert that some landmark of our world is fixed at 73 degrees 57 minutes and 53 seconds west longitude and 40 degrees 51 minutes and 14 seconds north latitude—a temporary description, at any rate, as if for a boat on the sea. Nevertheless, these coordinates will, for what is generally described as the foreseeable future, bring you with absolute precision to the west apron of the George Washington Bridge. Nine A.M. A weekday morning. The traffic is some gross demonstration in particle physics. It bursts from its con-fining source, aimed at Chicago, Cheyenne, Sacramento, through the high dark roadcuts of the Palisades Sill. A young woman, on foot, is being pressed up against the rockwall by the wind booms of the big semis—Con Weimar Bulk Transportation, Fruehauf Long Ranger. Her face is Nordic, her eyes dark brown and Latin—the bequests of grandparents from the extremes of Europe. She wears mountain boots, blue jeans. She carries a single-jack sledgehammer. What the truckers seem to notice, though, is her youth, her long bright Norwegian hair; and they flirt by air horn, driving needles into her ears. Her name is Karen Kleinspehn. She is a geologist, a graduate student nearing her Ph.D., and there is little doubt in her mind that she and the road and the rock before her, and the big bridge and its awesome city—in fact, nearly the whole of the continental United States and Canada and Mexico to boot—are in stately manner moving in the direction of the trucks. She has not come here, however, to ponder global tectonics, although goodness knows she could, the sill being, in theory, a signature of the events that created the Atlantic. In the Triassic, when New Jersey and Mauretania were of a piece, the region is said to have begun literally to pull itself apart, straining to spread out, to break into great crustal blocks. Valleys in effect competed. One of them would open deep enough to admit ocean water, and so for some years would resemble the present Red Sea. The mantle below the crust—exciting and excited by these events—would send up fillings of fluid rock, and with such pressure behind them that they could intrude between horizontal layers of, say, shale and sandstone and lift the country a thousand feet. The intrusion could spread laterally through hundreds of square miles, becoming a broad new layer—a sill—within the country rock.

This particular sill came into the earth about two miles below the surface, Kleinspehn remarks, and she smacks it with the sledge. An air horn blasts. The passing tires, in their numbers, sound like heavy surf. She has to shout to be heard. She pounds again. The rock is competent. The wall of the cut is sheer. She hits it again and again—until a chunk of some poundage falls free. Its fresh surface is asparkle with crystals—free-form, asym-
metrical, improvisational plagioclase crystals, bestrewn against a field of dark pyroxene. The rock as a whole is called diabase. It is salt-and-peppery charcoal-tweed savings-bank rock. It came to be that way by cooling slowly, at depth, and forming these beautiful crystals.

“It pays to put your nose on the outcrop,” she says, turning the sample in her hand. With a smaller hammer, she tidies it up, like a butcher trimming a roast. With a felt-tip pen, she marks it “1.” Moving along the cut, she points out xenoliths—blobs of the country rock that fell into the magma and became encased there like raisins in bread...

Critique for POV and Voice
On a sunny Saturday afternoon in June, John Anderson, a 43-year-old sawmill worker, sits in front of his pretty green-trimmed house in a family-friendly subdivision in Orting, Washington, not far from Seattle. He gazes contentedly down the street, scratching his neat goatee and watching the neighborhood kids shoot hoops in a driveway. It's an ordinary day in suburban America, but here in Orting, behind every house, mostly ignored, is 14,410-foot-high, snowcapped Mount Ranier. This is one of the continent's most spectacular sights: a mountain that seems to loom and then recede, sometimes crisply focused and near enough to touch, at other times shifting into the fog, vanishing, then reappearing. “When we get a full moon and it comes up over the mountain, it's really something,” says Anderson, leading a visitor into the backyard for a better view.

Anderson takes Ranier for granted. The mountain views came with the house, which cost $120,000 three years ago. In most places, such views would only add to the value of real estate over time, but Anderson's house hasn't appreciated a dime since he bought it. That's because Mount Rainier, the highest point in the Cascades, is not just lovely scenery. It's the most dangerous volcano in the United States. When it erupts—and it will—blistering avalanches of incandescent rock, lava, and ash will sweep down the volcano. Worse, unimaginably large flows of mud hundreds of feet deep, called lahars, filled with melted ice, boulders, and whole forests of uprooted trees, will pour down adjacent river val-
Point of View is worth stressing over, it’s that important. Even pros have to remind themselves to avoid sliding into an Omniscient viewpoint. I avoid that by imagining my Point of View or Perspective Character as my camera’s limited to writing only what my character sees, hears, and knows. In essence, I’m limited to his or her perspective. Breaking Down the Point of View Voices. First Person is the second most common voice in fiction, but I recommend it for many beginning novelists, because it forces you to limit your viewpoint to one Perspective Character which you should do with all POVs except Omniscient. My first 13 novels (The Margo Mysteries) were written in first-person past tense.