

Look Who's Talking: Mastering POV and Tense

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This workshop was presented at the Romance Writers of America National Conference in July 2009 by Susan Lyons, award-winning author of novels, novellas, and short fiction, both sexy and sweet. Susan writes for Kensington Brava (as Susan Fox), Kensington Aphrodisia, Berkley Heat, Harlequin Spice Briefs, The Wild Rose Press, and Freya's Bower. Visit www.susanlyons.ca for book info, excerpts, behind-the-scenes information, contests, newsletter signup, and more.

This workshop focuses on romance and women's fiction – novels, novellas, short stories. Basic rule: “Choose the simplest, clearest, least noticeable technique that will still accomplish what the story requires” (Orson Scott Card, *Characters & Viewpoint*). Techniques (e.g., tense, POV) should be a channel between characters and reader, not a barrier throwing the reader out of the story.

There are no hard and fast rules. A great writer can make anything work!

Read books in the line you're targeting and see what tense and POV are most often used.

TENSE

The time of action expressed by the verb. You'll use either present, past, or a combination.

Past tense: The actions are expressed as taking place in the past. “She[I] met a cute guy.”

Advantage: In romance, it's the most common tense. The reader expects it and won't notice.

Disadvantage: It's less immediate.

Present tense: The actions are expressed as taking place now. “She meets [I meet] the guy.”

Advantages: It's immediate and suspenseful. It can affect pacing more than past tense.

Disadvantages: It's less common in romance (more so in women's fiction and chick lit). Readers may find it hard to identify with. It's harder to do well. May work better in shorter fiction.

Past tense: telling about something that has already happened.

Present tense: experiencing it as it happens.

Mixing tenses: In general, keep the viewpoint character's narration in one tense. However:

- Self-talk is typically done in present tense, even if the narrative is in past tense.
- In dialogue, write the way the character talks. It may be present, past or a mix.
- You may (more in women's fiction than romance, and long vs short fiction), have one type of scene in one tense and one type in another (e.g., current-day versus flashback scenes).

POINT OF VIEW

Whose head is the reader in? Through which character's eyes and brain does the reader experience the story? Generally, the protagonist is the POV character. In romance, typically there are two protagonists, heroine and hero, and the reader wants both POVs.

Options:

- First: The “I” voice – e.g., “I go/went to the store.”
- Third: The “she/he” voice – e.g., “She goes/went to the store” or “Mary goes/went to the store.”
- Second: The “you” voice – e.g., “You go/went to the store.” Used mostly for self-talk.
- Omniscient: The author's voice. The author can be anywhere – observing from the outside, dipping into any character's head for any length of time, addressing the reader directly, presenting her own thoughts. Rarely used in romance because it's distant, not intimate.
- Non-human: The dog/cat has a voice. Most often used for a secondary characters and humor
- Epistolary: The story is told through letters, emails, text messages, diaries (e.g., Bridget Jones),

etc. Rare to see a whole book like this but often emails etc. are included.

First and third are most common in romance and women's fiction. POV tends to be deep, giving the reader an intimate knowledge of and connection with the character (knowing her thoughts/feelings).

First person:

Advantages:

- Immediate, intimate, emotionally intense.
- Can give an impression that the story is true.
- The narrator's voice comes through clearly because it's heard directly. Narrator uses own distinctive words/speech patterns. Conveys personality.
- It's easy to mix actions, perceptions, memories and so on, because the author and reader are inside the narrator's head, rather than writing about her.
- It's natural, in that we experience the world from inside one head and don't leap to another.
- Writer may find it easier to know and become the character, not just write about her.

Disadvantages (some are more significant problems in long novels than in stories):

- Some readers dislike first person. It can be monotonous, aggravating or artificial.
- The narrator is the key to the success of the story. She must have attitude. Her voice must be strong and interesting enough to keep the reader engaged through the length of the story or book, yet not so bizarre as to put readers off.
- The writer has to know the narrator intimately because every word reflects her personality, experience and world view.
- Need to make sure you don't have too much introspection; balance with action and dialogue.
- Be careful about using "I thought," "I remembered," etc. They are distancing.
- When you're writing "I," it can be hard to separate yourself from the character.

Third person:

Advantages:

- Readers are used to it so it's invisible. There's no barrier between the narrator and reader.
- Some find it easier to read and less emotionally exhausting.

Disadvantages:

- It's less immediate and intimate.
- May be hard to make the narrator's voice distinctive and intimate enough. Tip: If you have this problem, try writing the scene in 1st person, then switch it over.
- Many points made about 1st person also apply to close/intimate 3rd – e.g., not using "she thought".

Combining first and third person POVs: Done more in women's fiction than romance, but it can be effective. Typically, the protagonist is written in first person so the reader identifies most closely with her, and the other viewpoint characters are written in third person.

Multiple POV characters – advantages and disadvantages:

- The reader can know and identify with more than one character, but not as intimately.
- More than one character's voice, personality and perceptions can be given. Information that isn't known by one character, or a scene they're not present at, can be conveyed in another's POV. A physical description of one viewpoint character can be given in another's POV.
- The writer has to choose whether to write each character in 3rd or 1st person, and at what place on the intimacy continuum of close to distant POV – and has to stay at that level.

- Writer has to choose the appropriate POV character for each scene.
- Using several POVs and POV shifts requires a great degree of writing skill.
- Multiple POVs, all in 1st person: Can create memorable characters and give the reader a close bond with each. But it's hard to do well: may distance the reader and spread/dilute attention; each character must have a distinctive voice; can be hard to shift between characters.

Only one POV character – advantages and disadvantages:

- You can only include things that character knows, observes, or guesses.
- It's hard to do credible self-description.
- The reader may get bored with having only one perspective. Or annoyed with the character. Can only know and relate to one character intimately.
- In romance, most readers want some insight into both the heroine's and the hero's thoughts and feelings. If you make both of them POV characters, then it's easy. If you choose to have only one as a POV character (e.g., the heroine), then the reader only knows about the hero's thoughts and feelings through the heroine's perceptions. This is a challenge, but done well can increase the reader's identification with the heroine and increase the suspense as the reader, along with the heroine, tries to figure out what's going through the hero's mind and what's in his heart.
- Sole POV, in 1st person: The reader may be drawn in and relate intimately to character, but if the reader doesn't like the character, she'll stop reading.

Which characters should have a POV? Guidelines for deciding:

- Have no more POVs than you need to tell the story effectively.
- Consider the conventions of the genre.
- What's the length?
- What type of story is it? Who has a character arc? Is it an ensemble story?
- What is the story (theme) and who can tell it most effectively?
- How closely do you want the reader to identify with the protagonist?
- What scenes need to be included? Who will be present in them? Present at the climax?
- Which characters have an interesting voice and can provide an interesting perspective?
- Who can you write most effectively?

Multiple POVS – writing tips:

- Make it clear fairly early in the book that you're using multiple POVs.
- Have an appropriate number of scenes for each viewpoint character – relative to their importance in the book – and make sure each narrator appears with appropriate regularity.
- To select the viewpoint character for a scene: who has the most at stake/to learn; whose thoughts/feelings does the reader need to know about; what info needs to be conveyed/kept secret?
- Pay particular attention to which character narrates the climactic scene.
- Consistently stay in one POV for the time you've decided to use it.
- Don't shift too frequently. You're asking the reader to leap from one character's head into another's. Don't shift more frequently than you need to in order to tell the story effectively. You don't always have to shift to convey a character's thoughts and feelings.
- Various methods for shifting POV: put the character's name at the beginning of the scene/chapter in her POV; establish POV in the first sentence of each scene (or each section in a new POV); not only write it in that character's distinctive voice but also use the new POV character's name and something that could only happen in her POV – e.g., not just a physical action but a thought or emotion that only she could think or feel.

Checklist for reviewing your manuscript:

- Is your choice of first person, third or a combination the most effective way of telling the story?
- Is your choice of tense the most effective?
- If you're using more than one viewpoint character, is each scene told in the POV of the correct one (e.g., the one who has necessary information; the one who has the most at stake; the one whose emotions the reader needs to know about)?
- What degree of intimacy do you want to create between the viewpoint character(s) and the reader, and are you achieving this with your choice of tense and POV?
- Does each viewpoint character have a distinctive voice, both in dialogue and introspection?
- Is/are your main viewpoint character/s sympathetic and interesting to the reader?
- When you're in one character's POV, are you consistent? Make sure you never leave the viewpoint character's mind or show anything she can't know about.
- Is it always clear whose POV you're in?
- When you change POV, do you immediately make this clear to the reader in an appropriate manner?

Exercises:

- When reading other authors, pay attention to the use of tense and POV. Is the author's choice the same one you would make? What would happen if, for example, the author used one POV rather than multiple, first person rather than third person, or chose a different POV character entirely? How would the story be different? What would be the impact if the author used a different tense? Try rewriting a scene from a different POV and tense.
- After you've started writing, rewrite your beginning with the other tense and a different POV. Which do you prefer? How do they differ? Give both to a critique partner and to a reader friend who isn't a writer. How do they react to each? Are their perceptions the same as yours?
- When you're starting a new story, write a brief bio of each of your main characters using first person. Or write a journal entry, or a letter or email from one character to another or to a friend or family member. What do you learn about the character?
- If you're feeling stalled in a story, try switching POV. If you're writing in third person and you feel as if your character really isn't coming alive and her voice isn't particularly interesting, re-write or write a new scene in first person. If you're writing in first and feel as if your character is too quirky or abrasive, switch to third and try that out.
- When you read a book that uses several viewpoints, keep track of when each POV is used and for how long, and map out the POV structure of the book. Was each scene told from the most effective POV? Did each POV character get enough scenes and at the right time to reflect her significance to the story?
- In a book with at least two POVs, is the climax told from the most effective POV? What would change if that scene was told in a different POV? Would the impact and message change?
- When you participate in an activity with other people, ask them afterwards about what they noticed and thought about it. Each person will likely have noticed different things and have different perceptions, not to mention tell the story in a different way. Bear that in mind when you're writing – i.e., each character will have their own voice and perceptions.

Reference books:

- *Characters, Emotion & Viewpoint*, Nancy Kress
- *Stein on Writing*, Sol Stein
- *Characters & Viewpoint*, Orson Scott Card
- *Self-Editing for Fiction Writers*, R. Browne and D. King

Many authors are comfortable with both tenses and different POVs, and find that different techniques work better for different characters and stories. See what you think of the following examples. Each is the beginning of a novel, novella or short story.

Sample 1

Ann Montgomery struggled to extricate herself from the driver's seat of her Miata. The cute convertible was built for jeans and sandals, not a business skirt, pantyhose and pumps. For a woman who'd speed down twisty country roads, have hot, body-contorting sex in the passenger seat, not drive the same two miles back and forth to the office seven days week.

She patted the shiny red paint and whispered, "Poor baby, you deserve a more fun owner than me." Pain stabbed through her jaw. *Aagh. How can I chat with my friends, not to mention eat dinner, when I can barely open my freaking mouth?* She ground her teeth.

"Ouch! Damn!" Oh yeah, right. Tooth-grinding was part of the reason her jaw hurt so much. At the age of twenty-eight, she truly was a physical mess.

For some reason, admitting it actually lifted her spirits.

"You all right, miss? Want valet service?" A cute young guy, couldn't be more than twenty, rushed up, reaching for her keys.

"I'm fine, and yes, please." She allowed herself the pleasure of watching him slide his long legs into the driver's seat. He intercepted her gaze and sent her a wink and a flashing grin.

No doubt he flirted with every sex-starved older woman whose car he parked, yet she couldn't help smiling. *Oh, yeah, hottie, you could give me a little special service!*

If she even remembered how to have sex. It had been so long since she'd played with anything phallic that wasn't battery operated.

Shaking her head, she walked toward Il Giardino, this week's Awesome Foursome dinner spot. Their evenings of outdoor dining were coming to an end now it was September. Tonight, though, the weather was perfect for the wonderful enclosed patio that made you feel like you were in Italy.

Not that Ann had ever been to Italy, much less even taken a week off in the four years since she'd joined Smythe Levinson LLP, one of the biggest law firms in Vancouver.

Touch Me by Susan Lyons (novel)

Sample 2

Backstage, pacing, Scott Jackman heard the raunchy music swell, the crowd whoop and roar. He groaned. What the fuck had he got himself into?

Who'd have guessed his lifelong ambition to be a firefighter would land him here? Yeah, he'd known that, as a probie, he'd be the butt of a bunch of stupid jokes. But if he'd ever figured he'd have to boogie his own *butt* across a stage in front of hundreds of screaming women—not to mention a bunch of gay guys, the gang from good old Firehall 11, and his little sister—he might have . . .

Hell no. Whatever his parents might wish, he'd never been cut out for the farming life in Chilliwack.

He was a firefighter, through and through. And firefighters were tough. If he could risk his life in smoke and flames, he could bloody well get through three minutes on stage.

Scott had made the first cut in the competition, based on photos submitted by a couple hundred guys. He was one of twenty-four finalists for twelve firefighter calendar spots. If he didn't win a month, the guys at the firehall would never let him forget it.

Beyond the curtains, the last notes of music were swallowed up in a thunder of applause. Crap. The audience was voting with their hands, feet and voices, and it sounded like the guy on stage was sure to make the calendar.

The curtains parted and a panting, laughing man burst through. He'd gone out wearing full firefighter turnout gear and was back minus the helmet and jacket. His muscled upper body gleamed with oil and sweat, and he was hauling his turnout pants up over leopard-print briefs. A fire hose was slung over his shoulder.

God knows what he'd done with the hose on stage.

Hot in Here by Susan Lyons (novel)

Sample 3

"Tash, describe your personality with three adjectives," my grandmother says.

"Hmm?" I lift my head from my book on Australia, and turn to her.

She's dressed for travel in navy stretch pants and a cotton sweater, and looks comfy in the business class seat. The champagne glass on her tray is empty and the women's magazine she bought in the airport is folded to an article with the heading "R U In Synch?"

"It's a test to see how compatible you are with your prospective mate," she explains.

"I don't have a prospective mate."

"You should, you're almost thirty."

"I'm twenty-eight." With nary a serious prospect in sight. And no, I'm not thrilled about that. But you see, I'm not the kind of woman who inspires romance in a guy. I'm the perennial girl-next-door type—and the street is definitely not Wisteria Lane.

"We'll do the quiz for the two of us," Nana says. "See how much we have in common, besides our coloring."

I've never been one to waste time on those foolish girly quizzes, yet she has me intrigued. "Three adjectives for you, and three for me?" At her nod, I think hard. There are a million words to describe Nana but I'm analytical and I want the best ones. "Loving, generous and . . ." I want to say flaky or eccentric, but that would be rude, and I do love my grandmother. "Impulsive. What did you say for yourself?"

"Spontaneous, passionate and loving."

So we hit two out of three. Passionate, though? Well, if she means a passion for living and making life fun—without much regard for the consequences—I guess she's right.

"Now you," she says.

"I'd say, rational, analytical and intelligent."

"I said, intelligent, well-intentioned and up-tight."

Okay, so much for holding back on being rude. I really should've said flaky, but at least I'm on the higher moral ground here.

"Hot Down Under" by Susan Lyons in *The Firefighter* (novella)

Sample 4

The radio – my sole companion for many hours now – announces that it's four in the morning when I hit the outskirts of Vancouver. This is the first time I've seen this city anything other than abuzz with its own weird energy.

Even at this hour there are a few other cars on the street, a few people on the sidewalks – the kind of people who make me punch the door lock button.

Traffic is so light that I could go straight in on the main streets, but instead I take the alleys. Call me crazy, but it feels to me like the only possible route to Jeff's.

I'm sick of the radio so I flick it off, and now it's just me and my thoughts filling the truck.

Catherine Elizabeth Jefferson. A gal who chooses a guy's name, but Jeff surely is all woman. Unlike any other woman I've ever met, though. Any other person. She's absolutely, totally, unquestionably unique. Yeah, I know that's redundant, but just "unique" doesn't get it across.

She's so special, that's what I'm trying to say.

She's special and unique – and me, I'm just an average Joe. Well, actually, I'm an average Frank, because that's my name.

"Silly old Bear," she says when I talk this way – she's Christopher Robin to my Pooh, in case you haven't got the picture – "silly old Bear, you're a fine person. Truly fine."

Fine. Now there's one of the biggest say-nothing words of modern English. "How you feelin'?" "Oh, fine." "How's the weather out there? The new job? Your relationship? Your kids?" Yeah. Everything's just *fine*.

I'm just fine. And Jeff is awesome.

So I'm not feeling so fine right now, to tell you the truth. About as scared as I've ever been in my life, if you really want to know.

"Taking the Alleys" by Susan Lyons (short story); published in *Dreams & Desires: A Collection of Romance and Erotic Tales* and *Woman's Weekly*