

## Choose a Narrator

One way to learn how to use the various styles of narrator is by writing short stories using different ones. In a while, you will get the hang of what you can and cannot accomplish with each type of narrator. If you are like me, at first you will tend to forget the rules and mix up the narrator types you are employing in a story. Don't worry about it, because you will spot these errors in short order during the editing process. How do I know that? Because to the reader, a change in narrating styles is not only distracting, but downright jarring! Let's examine the different narrators in some detail:

**The omniscient narrator** This is the all-knowing narrator. He can get into your protagonist's head, tap his thoughts, feelings and memory. He can do the same for any character. But there's more! He has a super-computer mind, capable of knowing everything, from what is happening or going to happen in a scene to obscure historical backgrounds and facts. In fact, the omniscient narrator is so powerful and wise that he often has insights into the characters' personalities of which they are clueless. The power of the omniscient narrator is very useful to the writer, because in the process of telling a story the writer can tap his knowledge and doesn't have to worry about limiting the sources of information to what your protagonist or any other character sees or knows. You can avoid the often awkward process of trickling facts into the story through dialogue or thoughts of characters, techniques you pretty much have to use in the case of the first person narrator or the close third person narrator.



Using the omniscient narrator's power comes with a price, however, and that price is less effectiveness in getting the reader to get really close to your protagonist. This problem results because the omniscient narrator seems to be viewing the characters and their scenes from a great distance, almost as if the characters are part of some sort of lab experiment. The more powerful and insightful the omniscient narrator is, the more distant the characters become, since it is usually the omniscient narrator doing the thinking and expressing his wisdom rather than the characters. In a nutshell, the omniscient narrator is in competition with the protagonist for top billing in the reader's mind.

My story, *Welcome to the Global Community*, employs a rather brusque but savvy omniscient narrator. Below is an excerpt that provides a good example of the power and limitation of this style:

Though Jasmine is past the age when flirting is acceptable, her green eyes meet the dusky boy-man's and she flashes a toothy smile. The hard-edged stare returned is as startling as ice water on sunburned skin. While her job as a fundraiser for Cleveland's John Carroll University has caused her to grow tolerant of activists—even sullen young activists—this one frightens her, because he looks and acts too much like something else.

Note how the narrator knows things about Jasmine, things she isn't necessarily currently thinking about, like the facts that she is past the flirting age and why she has grown to be tolerant of activists. The omniscient narrator makes it easy to put these facts in front of the reader. How would you put forth the same information using Jasmine as a first person narrator? Maybe it would look like this:

I know I'm past the age when flirting is acceptable, but I can't stop my eyes from meeting the dusky boy-man's. Like ice water on sunburned skin, I feel the shock of the hard edge in his stare. My face starts coloring like a tomato. *Damn.* You'd think that all those years of fund raising at John Carroll University in Cleveland would make me more tolerant of angry young activists. But, oh God, he frightens me. He looks too much like something else.

From this example, you can tell that it is more awkward to convey all the information that the omniscient narrator managed to do so effortlessly. In fact, Jasmine's history at John Carroll University and the fact that it is in Cleveland, should not be conveyed in the first person the way I have tried to do it. The reader will know immediately that it is unrealistic for someone who is in the midst of flirting and then shocked by a hateful stare would be thinking about details like that. If I were writing in the first person, I would have had to work that information into the story earlier in some other manner. On the other hand, ignoring the awkward part, I believe the reader feels the emotion of the moment much more intensely when communicated in the first person. It's personal. It is being conveyed by Jasmine in her own way using her own personality and not by a nameless narrator.

I decided to use the omniscient narrator in *Welcome to the Global Community* because I wanted to emphasize the plot and its societal ramifications, rather than the characters themselves. If you read the entire story, you might notice there is no single protagonist, because all the characters are somewhat equal in importance, and are more or less relegated to devices used to tell the story.

As an additional twist, you can even give the omniscient narrator a specific identity and personality. A clever and innovative example of this technique is the novel, *The Book Thief*, wherein the omniscient narrator is the Grim Reaper! It is not unusual to encounter the omniscient narrator in fiction, but it is employed less in comparison to the close third person and first person narrators.

**Third person narrator** This narrator comes in second in the "handy" category. You can



make him about sixty percent as powerful as the omniscient narrator by allowing him to tap the thoughts, feelings and memories of every character. But you can't make him all-knowing beyond what is in the brains of the characters, because then he would be the omniscient narrator. This narrator provides a better balance between the useful wisdom of a knowledgeable narrator and the reader's sense of closeness

to the protagonist and other characters. While I have never used this iteration of the third person narrator, I believe it might be useful in a story where there is more than one character, and you want the reader to know each on a more or less equal basis. For

example, if I had written *Welcome to the Global Community* in a way where I wanted the reader to be a bit closer to the four major characters, I would have employed the third person narrator.

I think that if someone were to count and determine the most popular narrator in fiction, it would be the **close third person**. This narrator only sees, hears and knows what the protagonist does. In this sense, he is very much a sibling of the first person narrator. My story, *Wading in Brooklyn*, uses this style narrator. Why is it likely the most used? Because it has almost the same power as the first person narrator, in terms of the ability to get the reader close to the protagonist, but it can be a bit easier and less awkward to use. Here is an excerpt from *Wading in Brooklyn* which I believe is a worthy example of this point:

Fair balls are hard to come by on Nostrand Avenue. This one is foul, struck by the stick a millisecond too late, and it careens between a parked Chevy Malibu and a SAAB 9-3, zeroing in on two old men seated at a round steel table in front of Olive's. After bouncing off the restaurant's stonework, it strikes the bottom of the tabletop, producing a sound like a Tibetan gong. Its energy spent, the ball lands on the lap of Jacob Weiss.

His long, thin face never flinches, and without lifting his eyes from the chessboard, he flings the rubber ball backhand to the street. His friend, Marvin, waves an acknowledgement to the thank-you of the tow-headed outfielder.

It is easy to see how the information above could be conveyed by the protagonist himself (whom, by the way, is Marvin), but again, it might be slightly more awkward. A few added phrases would be necessitated, like "I see" and "I know". No big deal, but still a bit of a pain. If you can imagine the excerpt written in the first person you can also imagine that the reader would feel closer to Marvin because everything would be coming directly from him and not filtered through a separate narrator, even one as unobtrusive as the close third person. And that is the key to how close you want the reader to be to a character(s). All the third person narrator styles, including the omniscient narrator most of all, are filters. Only the first person is not.

So this leaves us with only the **first person narrator** to discuss. Once again, I will reference one of my stories, *Boy Interrupted*. The protagonist and narrator is a young boy. As we all know, young people act, talk and think differently than your average adult. If you have a special protagonist, like my young friend Frankie, and you want your reader to be as close as possible to him—to see and feel everything he does—then you *must* use the first person narrator. Read the excerpt below from *Boy Interrupted* and try to imagine a nameless third person narrator conveying the same information:



Don't take but a few minutes to down a Minute Maid and a bowl of Kix. Pa says I'm in too big a rush to do nothing, but that morning I had a reason. I wanted to take the *New York Times World Atlas* out on the front stoop before it got too hot. Ma's folks mailed it one Christmas when she lived here. Maude would still be dusting the darn thing if the Motorola TV hadn't bonked out. When I picked up

that book, I found more pictures than the *Superboy* comics—real ones—and nothing at all about Stewart Springs.

If your conclusion is the same as mine, it can't be done. First, the narrator can't talk like a young boy, unless you identify and name a young boy as the third person narrator, who then becomes the observer, and then he can talk like a boy. In this case, that would be pointless. But, if you wanted to tell a story from the perspective of a unique narrator who isn't directly involved in the plot, the technique could be useful. Perhaps the best known use of this "named" third person narrator/observer is Scout, in *To Kill a Mocking Bird*.

To summarize, if you have a story populated by a variety of important characters, you might consider using the third person narrator. If you want to emphasize the plot of the story or convey opinions/points/lessons, and your characters are essentially devices to these ends, then you will probably want to use the omniscient narrator. And finally, if you have a protagonist in your story with whom you want the reader to become very close to, then always pick the first person narrator.