AN EDITING GLOSSARY

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4. Point of View, Purpose, Punctuation, Scenes, Sentences

Point of View

Understanding point of view (POV) is often one of the most difficult aspects of writing for beginning writers. Writers need to decide what will be the best POV for their story (or nonfiction) purpose, and then keep it consistent. Also, the character who tells the story will determine the shape of the story. It is a good idea, when thinking about what POV to use, to try writing a particular scene or chapter repeatedly, each time from a different point of view, and decide what works best for your story's purpose and storyline. The following points will help you understand the different points of view and how to avoid POV problems such as "head-hopping."

First Person POV

The story's narrator--"I"—is telling the story. First person may be "omniscient" (the narrator knows what every character is thinking—in this case the narrator is usually a minor character, observing from the fringes of the story, or possibly may be a character who is looking back in time and thus has had access to other character's thoughts after the events). More often, first person POV is "limited" (the narrator knows only a single character's point of view—in this case, the narrator is usually one of the characters in the story, most often a main character).

- Advantages for First Person POV include a sense of naturalness and immediacy in the story. Readers move quickly into the story, and easily relate to the narrating character, as there is a feeling that narrator and reader are sitting together carrying on a conversation, and the narrator is telling the story. The tone of the story can be easily developed through the narrator's attitude.
- A disadvantage to using First Person POV is that if there is a large cast of characters, if the narrator is one of the characters, he/she must be present at all times, or must in some other way have direct knowledge of everything readers need to know, which can become complicated.
- An option which has become increasingly popular for First Person POV is to have two or more characters as first-person narrators. They take turns speaking, usually in alternating

chapters or sections. This allows the reader to have a broader view of the story events, and two or more characters can supply information. The writers can also move through time and space more easily. However, each character must have a distinct voice and attitude, which requires the writer to have strong writing skills.

Second Person POV

While second person point of view—speaking to ”you”—is frequently used in non-fiction, especially in “how-to” works, self-help works, and other formats where the author wants to speak directly to the reader and explain how to do something, or convince them personally of something, it is not used very often in fiction, especially in longer fictional works. The repetition of the “you” approach can begin to sound peculiar or eccentric or can feel overly individualistic. This POV is sometimes used in “experimental” literature, especially in short stories, but to be successful in fiction really requires strong writing skills.

Third Person POV

Third person point of view—he, she, they—is perhaps the easiest point of view for a beginning writer. As with first person POV, third person can be either “omniscient” or “limited.”

- In omniscient third person, the author is a distant observer who knows everything that is happening, seeing and hearing the action as if through the “video camera’s eye.” However, the characters’ inner thoughts have to be inferred from their actions. So the story has a sense of “real life” but focuses on external activities rather than on the internal world of the characters’ personalities.
- The goal of limited Third Person POV is to help readers feel involved in the story. The viewpoint is that of a single character: what he or she personally sees, hears, or thinks (or is informed of by another character). Internal thoughts can be shared through the use of the “he thought” format, or through the use of italics, or indirectly through mood, words, and actions.
- More than one limited third person POV can exist in a story, but only one character can be thinking in any particular scene; otherwise, you will have head-hopping, which is a sure sign of amateur writing skills, and which can be confusing for the reader as they have to dash from one character’s viewpoint/perception to another’s. Methods to shift viewpoints include separating viewpoints into chapters or using close-up or long shot scenes as in movies. Again, using multiple viewpoints in a book can be a challenge for a beginning writer to do well.

Purpose

The purpose of your book or other form of writing is your reason for writing it and/or the point you want to make. Before you start to write, it is important to ask yourself what you are trying to accomplish with this particular piece of writing. Then keep that purpose in mind throughout the writing and self-editing process, and inform your editor, designer, and other helpers of your purpose. Your purpose should be clear enough that your readers can easily summarize your storyline or the argument or other point you are making, as well as your main theme(s) or thesis. The purpose also includes the understanding, insight, or shift in awareness which you hope your piece will bring to your reader.

Four main purposes for writing

- To entertain: this is usually narrative or story writing, but may include books of jokes or riddles, cartoons, or other humorous art, etc.
- To prove a point: persuasive writing.
- To explain an issue, explain how to do something, or describe something: expository writing.
- To tell a story: narrative writing.

These different purposes for writing will affect the writing form you choose. Keep in mind that whatever kind of writing you choose to best feature your purpose—fiction, non-fiction, short stories, novels, poems, plays or screenplays, essays, academic, memoir, flash fiction, journalistic writing, blogging, newspaper columns, academic writing, and so on—there are specific requirements and expectations which you as a writer must meet, and you must study those requirements before you start writing.

Punctuation

How important is correct punctuation? Along with spelling and capitalization errors, punctuation errors are often the first writing problem readers notice—and they will consider such errors to be a sure sign of an amateur writer and poor editing. Punctuation errors are annoying for readers and can change the meaning of your sentence or paragraph, so it is important you self-edit punctuation carefully.

Since there are different rules for punctuation, depending on the kind of writing you are doing, it is essential that you obtain and study a copy of the style manual applicable to your type of writing. That said, here are some basic punctuation tips you should be aware of:

Types of punctuation marks:

There are many kinds of punctuation marks or forms, and each has a specific purpose. Be sure to study and use properly: periods (aka end points), question marks, exclamation marks, commas, semicolons, colons, indents, hyphens, en-dashes, em-dashes, ellipses, quotation marks (single and double), asterisks, italics, apostrophes for contractions and/or possession, ellipses, parentheses, brackets, mathematical symbols, accents, and more. If you can't find a rarely used punctuation mark on your computer keyboard, check to see if your word processor has a special place for unusual symbols. In Word 2010, go to "Insert … Symbols … More Symbols … Special Characters." Who would have thought there are so many punctuation marks and other obscure symbols (especially in technical writing)?

Choice of punctuation and consistency:

Some punctuation marks can be used in a variety of ways, but in any single piece of writing, you should choose a single type of use (or at most two types of uses) for a particular punctuation form and then be consistent. For example, italics may be used for foreign language words, book titles, characters' thoughts, or word emphasis. Choose which use is most important for your particular work. Ideally, for things like emphasis and characters' thoughts, rewrite rather than use punctuation.

Punctuation and meaning:

Punctuation use is not just about "rules" — it is also an important aspect of making sense and developing meaning in your writing. The comma is particularly important in this respect. Consider the difference in meaning in these commonly quoted examples:

- Let's eat, Grandma. OR Let's eat Grandma. (Correct punctuation can save a person's life!)
- This book is dedicated to my parents, Ayn Rand, and God. OR This book is dedicated to my parents, Ayn Rand and God. (Interesting heritage, right? This is an example of the use—or not—of the "Oxford Comma." Do an online search for "Oxford Comma Memes" for some entertainment).

  If you find a particular type of punctuation causes problems with meaning or creates an awkward sentence, rewriting the sentence may solve your problem—and improve your writing.

Purposes for punctuation:

Different kinds of punctuation may be used for the same purpose. In that case, study your style manual's examples and choose the best option for your particular situation. For example,

either a comma (with a conjunction) OR a semicolon (without a conjunction) may be used to join two complete thoughts/sentences if the thoughts are closely related. Which to use? Study the examples in your style guide and decide what will work best.

Study your style guide:

Speaking of style guides/manuals, make sure you are using the appropriate guide for your genre or writing type and make sure it is up to date. With ever-changing technology, and the evolution of language, the rules do change. You can purchase a traditional book copy of your guide, or for many guides, you can now subscribe online and have access to updates as they occur. (Or you can check a copy from the library reference section).

If your style guide is confusing you, or you can't find a suitable example, take a look in well-written, reputable books in your genre and see how other authors are using punctuation—especially in dialogue.

Exclamation marks? Stop!

Use them only occasionally, and even then, just for short exclamatory words or phrases. It's far better to rewrite so that your reader senses excitement or tension through your writing. Never use more than one exclamation mark at a time, and do not mix question and exclamation marks. In a novel-length book, the general advice is to not use more than four to six exclamation marks in the entire text. Imagine how few that would mean using in an article or short story.

Quotation marks:

Believe it or not, generally speaking, single quotation marks are only used for quotations within quotations.

Apostrophes:

Watch out for correct use of apostrophes (possession and contractions). Please, please don't use them for creating plurals, other than plural possession. And don't use them for acronyms like MPs and MLAs unless there might be ambiguity (as in SIN's). Not sure what those even mean? Check your style guide.

Titles:

Another area of common confusion is the rules related to indicating titles, for example, italics for larger works and quotation marks for shorter works and … oh my goodness, just get out your style manual and read the rules carefully. Very carefully.

Dialogue:

Study your style guide very, very carefully. And when you can't figure out what to do, read well-respected books in your genre. (Did I mention this before?).

Commas:

I did mention them before, didn't I? But there are so, so many different rules for using commas. Bookmark your style guide at the commas section. You'll be referring to it often.

Underlines and spaces:

Remember when your elementary school teacher taught you to underline titles? Just don't. Underlining isn't used that way anymore because it can be confused with computer links. And when your typing teacher taught you to leave two spaces after each period? Again, don't. One space is the standard now (for good reasons). I'm sure I already mentioned that punctuation rules have been changing, right? Check.

Any questions? Yes! Check your style guide.

Scenes

Scenes are the building blocks of your story. They are the individual chunks of the story that build from the opening to the ending. Just like your full story, each scene has its own narrative arc in which a character or characters engage in action or dialogue. Similarly, each scene has a setting and a beginning, a middle, and an end, and includes some kind of tension or conflict (whether external or internal) that moves the scene (and the overall story) ahead and often reveals a truth that affects the protagonist's perspective or actions in some way.

Sometimes scenes are called chapters, but while some chapters actually do have just one scene, other chapters may have two or three scenes or sometimes more. A nice thing about scenes is that they are must shorter than the overall storyline, and thus are much easier to self-edit one at a time. Start your self-editing by reading through the entire manuscript to get the "big picture" but then, in order not to be overwhelmed, you can self-edit scene by scene.

Finally, you can do another full read-through to make sure that the story flows well and makes sense.

When you are self-editing each of your scenes, ask yourself these questions:

- Does it advance the overall plot (is it necessary to the storyline?)
- Does it fit in with the overall setting (time, place/world, mood and tone) of the story? Does it draw readers into the setting?
- Does it provide the protagonist with new and important information?
- Does it cause the protagonist (main character) and possibly other characters to change and evolve?
- Who are the characters involved in the situation?
- How does the action (or dialogue) in this scene challenge the central characters?
- What does each character want, and how does that support (or conflict with) what other characters want?
- What conflict is taking place between the protagonist and antagonist? What is the source of that conflict? What will happen as a result of the conflict, especially to the protagonist, but possibly also to other characters or even to the story's world? (Remember, the antagonist isn't necessarily a person; it can be an act of nature, a supernatural being, or any other antagonistic situation or being that a character must face).
- What inner conflict is taking place within the character? How will that change him or her?
- Does the scene develop the main conflict and/or create a related sub-conflict? Does it include rising tension?
- Does it have an important purpose in the story?
- Does the scene stick to the theme(s) and overarching plot line and structure, and doesn't go off on a tangent?
- Why does this event have to happen? How is this event meaningful for the overall story?
- Does this scene carry consequences that will determine what comes next?
- Is it plausible (believable), fitting in with the story's context and with the genre?
- Does it include body language for characters when the scene requires it?
- Does each scene have a natural flow and transition from one scene to another?
- Is the scene fully and vividly envisioned?
- Does it use at least two or three senses in describing the situation and thus engage the readers, making them feel as if they are there witnessing the scene themselves?

Sentences

Well-written sentences join carefully chosen words and are the foundation of well-written paragraphs, which in turn lead to well-written scenes and/or chapters, and finally to an overall well-written story. So, you can see that sentences are very important. Famous authors will

often rewrite their sentences over and over until each sentence provides the exact meaning and mood the author is after as he or she attempts to communicate clearly with the audience and engage them in the story. The structure of sentences is what we refer to as "grammar." As you self-edit, check the following points:

- Are the words in your sentence in correct order? Are they clear in meaning, or are they clumsy or awkward to read? Can you rewrite them to provide clarity for your readers?
- Have you (mostly) used active construction (e.g. "She threw a brick at the window") and (mostly) avoided passive construction (e.g. "The window had a brick thrown at it by her."). (There are times when it is useful to use passive construction. Check your style guide or writing handbook for examples).
- Have you used a variety of sentence types and lengths in order to provide interest, good pacing/flow, and to build tension (short sentences often are good for building tension; longer sentences can slow down or calm a scene)?
    - Simple sentence: a complete sentence with a single idea and comprised of one subject and one predicate (e.g., The coyote howled. OR The coyote howled at the moon).
    - Complex sentences: have a dependent clause followed by an independent clause (or vice versa), and form a complete thought (e.g., Although it was past midnight, Erin was working on her essay. OR The restaurant has become very popular since the chef created an exciting new menu).
    - Compound sentences: have at least two independent clauses (which can each stand alone as a complete thought) joined by a comma, semi-colon, and/or conjunction (e.g., That concert is too expensive, so I'll attend a movie instead.)
    - Compound-complex sentences: have at least two independent clauses and one or more dependent clauses (e.g., Even though I wanted to attend the concert, I went to the movies instead, and I thoroughly enjoyed watching the new sci-fi film.)
- Do your sentences have proper gender and/or number references?
- Do your sentences make sense? Be careful! (e.g., For breakfast, Allie cooked the small brown rabbit over a campfire her dog had caught for her. … What? The dog caught a campfire for Allie?)
- Have you corrected run-on sentences? (e.g., The dog was threatening to attack, Sara did not care).
- Have you avoided sentence fragments, except for occasional times when you are using them for a specific effect? (e.g., She drove through the entire length of the country. Stopping occasionally to snap a photo.).
- Have you varied the words you use to start sentences? Have you avoided "He … He… He…" or "I… I… I…"? Have you used a variety of nouns, pronouns, articles, verbs, prepositional phrases, etc., to start your sentences?

- Do you have any parallel structure issues that need to be corrected? (e.g., Every morning we make breakfast, dishes, and are feeding the dog).
- Have you avoided long complicated sentences when a short, simple, straightforward sentence will do? (e.g., We fed the dog who was barking with great gusto because he was hungry —> We fed the hungry, loudly barking dog.) Have you split up long sentences to make them more reader friendly? Can you combine short, choppy sentences to make the writing smoother?
- Could you combine short, closely related sentences with appropriate conjunctions or other joining-type or transition words (and, or, but, however, because, therefore…) if it will improve them?
- Have you kept your audience's age, reading level, and other aspects in mind as you write?
- If you are presenting an argument and trying to persuade your reader, have you used word order which places your most important points where your reader is likely to most notice them? For example, place the most important idea at the end of the sentence, the second most important at the start, and the least important in the middle. (This works for paragraphs, too, and persuasive essays with multiple paragraphs).
- Have you chosen clear, concise nouns and verbs for your sentences, which most clearly express your idea(s), rather than overloading your sentences with adjectives and adverbs?
- Have you avoided starting sentences with "there is" or "there are"?
- Have you sometimes shown the connection and order of your sentences with carefully chosen transition words and phrases that show how the ideas are related?

Don't forget to place this exercise in your binder or Duotang. And now go on to part 5 in this series: Setting, Show Don't Tell, Spelling.