

Look Who's Talking: Mastering POV

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International bestselling, award-winning author Susan Lyons (also writing as Susan Fox and Savannah Fox) writes “emotionally compelling, sexy contemporary romance” (*Publishers Weekly*). She is published by Kensington and Berkley. A native British Columbian, she sets her stories in B.C. Her books have been translated into French, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish, and German. Many are available as audio books. Susan has degrees in law and psychology, and has had a variety of careers, including computer consultant and legal editor. Fiction writer is her favorite, providing an outlet to demonstrate her belief in people’s courage to face challenges and to grow emotionally, especially when fueled by the power of love.

BASICS

- “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 your genre, especially the ones you love, and analyze what those authors do.
- Experiment and see what works.

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. The narrator is telling about something that has already happened.

- Advantage: In most genres, it’s the 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. The narrator is experiencing the event as it happens.

- Advantage: It’s immediate and suspenseful.
- Disadvantage: Readers may not identify with it.

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 have one type of scene in one tense and one type in another (e.g., 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 a POV character. If there are multiple main characters or important characters, they may also have POV scenes.

Options for POV "Person"

- 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."
- Second: The "you" voice – e.g., "You go/went to the store."
- 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 his own thoughts. Distancing rather than intimate.
- Non-human: The dog/cat has a voice. Can add a fresh perspective and humor.
- Epistolary: The story is told through letters, emails, text messages, diaries, etc. Rare to see a whole book like this but often texts, emails etc. are included in contemporary stories.

First and third are most common in commercial fiction.

Consider depth of POV. How intimate a knowledge of the POV character's thoughts and feelings should the reader have?

First Person

Advantages:

- Immediate, intimate, emotionally intense.
- Can give more of an impression that the story is truth, not fiction.
- The narrator's voice comes through clearly because it's heard directly. Narrator uses her 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.
- Writer may find it easier to know and become the character, not just write about her.

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

- Some readers dislike first person.
- When not done well, it can be monotonous, aggravating or artificial.
- The narrator is the key to the success of the story. He must have attitude. His 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 character intimately because every word reflects his personality, experience and world view.
- Need to make sure you don't have too much introspection; balance with action and dialogue.
- When you're writing "I," it can be hard to separate yourself from the character.
- Be careful about using "I thought," "I remembered," etc. They are distancing.

Third Person

Decide on depth of POV; where on the continuum of intimacy.

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.
- Narrator's voice isn't as strong, direct, and idiosyncratic. May be hard to make the narrator's voice distinctive enough. Tip: If you have this problem, try writing the scene in 1st person, then switch it over.
- Some points made about 1st person apply to close/intimate 3rd – e.g., avoiding "she thought."

Combining first and third person POVs: Rare. The protagonist may be written in first person so the reader identifies most closely with her, and the other viewpoint characters are written in third.

How Many POVs?

- Have no more POVs than you need to tell the story effectively.
- Consider the conventions of the genre. What type of story is yours? Who has a character arc? Is it an ensemble story?
- What's the length?
- 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?

Only one POV character – advantages and disadvantages:

- It's natural, in that we experience the world from inside one head and don't know what others are thinking and feeling.
- Reader only gets to relate to one character intimately – love her or hate her. Other characters are viewed more remotely, filtered through the narrator. The reader may get bored with having only one perspective.
- You can include only things the POV character knows, observes, or guesses.
- The POV character must be present for all the scenes in the book. Actions he wasn't present for have to be conveyed second-hand.
- You are limited to the narrator's world view and perceptions of people and situations.
- It's hard to do credible self-description.
- Sole POV in 1st person: The advantages and disadvantages are magnified. Have to love the protagonist.

Multiple POVS – advantages and disadvantages:

- The reader can get to know and identify with more than one character, but maybe 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 she's not present at, can be conveyed in another's POV.
- A physical description of one viewpoint character can be given in another's POV.
- You can withhold information by not including the POV of the person who knows it.
- In one POV, you can reveal that another narrator is unreliable.
- Multiple POVs in 1st person: Can create two or more memorable characters and give the reader a close bond with each – or can come across as a stylistic exercise and/or keep the reader from relating to any one character. Difficult to handle the shift back and forth.

Multiple POVS – writing techniques:

- Initial choice: whether to write them all in 3rd person, all in 1st, or one or more in each.
- Second choice: right place on the intimacy continuum of close to distant POV for each character – and you'll need to stay at the same level.
- Make it clear fairly early in the book that you're using multiple POVs.
- Have an appropriate number of scenes for each POV character.
- Select the POV character for each 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?
- Consistently stay in one POV for the time you've decided to use it.

- Pay particular attention to which character narrates the climactic scene.
- Don't shift too frequently. Do shift effectively, so as not to confuse or distance the reader.
- Methods for shifting POV:
 - Put the character's name at the beginning of the scene/chapter in her POV (rare).
 - Use a scene/chapter break (spacer).
 - Always establish POV at the beginning: write in that character's distinctive voice and include something that could only happen in her POV (not just a physical action but a thought or emotion only she could think/feel).

TENSE, "PERSON" AND NUMBER OF POVS: YOUR OPTIONS

- present tense; 1st person; single POV
- present tense; 3rd person; single POV
- present tense; 1st person; multiple POVs
- present tense; 3rd person; multiple POVs
- past tense; 1st person; single POV
- past tense; 3rd person; single POV
- past tense; 1st person; multiple POVs
- past tense; 3rd person; multiple POVs

And don't forget about depth of POV.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Experiment and get comfortable with different options.

When in doubt which to use for your book, try several. See which rings true. Seek reader reactions.

If you're blocked, try a different option.

Different styles resonate with different readers. You'll never please everyone. So be true to your voice, your characters, and your story.

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

CHECKLIST FOR REVIEWING YOUR MANUSCRIPT

- Is your choice of 1st person, 3rd, or a combination the most effective way to tell this 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 narrative?
- 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 he 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, 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 a single 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 a story, rewrite the beginning experimenting with the other tense and a different POV. Which do you like better? How do they differ? Give both to a critique partner and also to a reader friend who isn't a writer, and ask how 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. 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 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 his own voice and perceptions.
- 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 scene told from the most effective POV? What would be different if that scene was told in another viewpoint character's POV? Would the impact and message change?

Sample 1

She eyed his sling, knowing he needed to wear it so the broken bones would heal in the correct position. "What can you do with one hand?"

"I'd be real happy to show you." His low, suggestive chuckle and the gleam in his eyes left no doubt that he was talking about more than saddling a few horses.

And Lord, for one quick, astonishing moment, she felt a responding tingle of sexual heat. Turning quickly to hide the color that flamed in her cheeks, she said crisply, "If that was an attempt at flirtation, I'm not interested."

"Okay, sorry. Old habits, I guess."

Old habits? Hah! No doubt he still cut a swathe through the buckle bunnies.

"I'm right-handed," he went on. "I can help with the horses. Then how about I hang around while you give your lesson? Maybe give my horse some water and exercise. After, we can talk about Penny."

He sounded matter-of-fact, with no hint of teasing innuendo, and he'd offered her the best inducement in the world: news of her family. She shot him a glance over her shoulder. This was Ben Traynor. He might've been a cocky young charmer, moving from conquest to conquest, but she'd never heard a single word about him being mean to a woman. Or to an animal. She'd always liked the respectful way he treated horses, even including the broncs he rode, those trained buckers whose immediate mission in life was to toss him out of the saddle and onto the dirt of the arena floor.

She'd probably misinterpreted his comment about showing her what he could do with one hand. Why would a sexy guy like him be flirting with a drab, worn-out woman like her?

Though she wasn't big on trusting men, something told her she was safe with Ben.

"Sure," she said. "Thanks."

* * *

Sally had changed, Ben thought as he followed her into the barn. There were moments when she seemed like her old self, but she was less outgoing and more guarded. Like she wasn't sure whether she trusted him. But then he'd been twenty-two the last time she saw him. She didn't know what kind of man he'd turned into in the past seven years.

Love Somebody Like You by Susan Fox (novel); published by Kensington Zebra

Sample 2

"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); published by Kensington Aphrodisia

Sample 3

"Yeah, okay." He tried to sound casual. "I'll be your token good guy. I'll fly out for the wedding."

"Oooooe!!!!" She flung herself into his arms, a full-body tackle that caught him off guard and almost toppled both of them. "Thank you, thank you, thank you." She pressed quick little kisses all over his cheeks. When what he longed for were soul-rocking, deep and dirty kisses, mouth to mouth, tongue to tongue. Groin to groin.

Enough. He was fed up with Kat treating him this way. Fed up with himself for taking it. Things between them were damned well going to change.

He grabbed her head between both hands and held her steady, her mouth inches from his.

Her lips opened and he heard a soft gasp as she caught her breath. "Nav?" Was that a quiver in her voice?

Deliberately, he pressed his lips against hers. Soft, so soft her lips were, and warm. Though it took all his willpower, he drew away before she could decide how to respond. "You're welcome," he said casually, as if the kiss had been merely a "between friends" one.

All the same, he knew it had reminded her of the attraction between them.

She would be a tiny bit unsettled.

He had, in a subtle way, served notice.

Token good guy? Screw that.

He was going to be the sexy guy on the train.

Chapter 2

The buzzer on Nav's dryer went off, but he hadn't returned to the laundry room yet.

He'd said yes to coming to M&M's wedding, then just when I'd been gushing thanks all over him, he'd taken off, saying he needed to do something upstairs.

Well, first, he'd given me that look. The one that downright sizzled. Then he'd kissed me and I'd almost expected . . . almost wanted . . . I touched my lips, still burning from that one brief brush of his.

No, that was crazy.

What Nav and I had was perfect just as it was. Though I'd always had lots of friends, I'd never felt as connected to any of them as to him. Boyfriends come and go, but it's your friends you can count on. I wasn't risking our friendship, not when every romantic relationship in my life had ended in disaster.

Love, Unexpectedly by Susan Fox (novel); published by Kensington Brava

Sample 4**Version A**

The radio – his sole companion for many hours now – announced that it was four in the morning when he hit the outskirts of Vancouver. Even at this hour there were a few other cars on the street, a few people on the sidewalks – the kind of people who made him punch the door lock button.

Traffic was so light that he could go straight in on the main streets, but instead he took the alleys. Call him crazy, but it felt to him like the only possible route to Jeff's.

He was sick of the radio so he flicked it off, and then it was just him and his thoughts filling the truck.

Catherine Elizabeth Jefferson. A gal who chose a guy's name, but Jeff surely was all woman. Unlike any other woman he'd ever met, though. Any other person. She was absolutely, totally, unquestionably unique. Yeah, he knew that was redundant, but just "unique" didn't get it across.

She was so special, that was what he meant.

She was special and unique – and him, he was just an average Joe. Well, actually, he was an average Frank, because that was his name.

Version B

The radio – my sole companion for many hours now – announces that it's four in the morning when I hit the outskirts of Vancouver. 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.

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