

Viewpoint: The Magic Key to Publishing

If there is one single reason why most new writers are unable to publish, it is because they do not understand viewpoint (POV).

Nothing is more terrifying, or exciting, than beginning to write a manuscript. The white page is blank, waiting to be filled with your ideas. If you're lucky enough to have a word processor, you find the blank screen waiting expectantly for your first sentence. But you face an immediate problem: who is your main character?

HOW TO SELECT YOUR MAIN CHARACTER

Once you have a story in mind, and you know the characters you want to use, you have to decide *who* will experience the events of the story (the protagonist) and *who* will record these events (the "viewpoint" or the angle of vision from which the story is told). It is important to remember that not all stories are told in the viewpoint of the main character, that is, as *experienced* by the protagonist. The choice of a main character and choice of viewpoint are both critical decisions. If the wrong character is chosen as a protagonist or the story is told from the wrong viewpoint, the story will fail. Consequently, much thought must be given as to which character and which viewpoint will produce the strongest story.

Take for example the story of "Snow White and the Seven Dwarves." In the traditional version an external storyteller tells us about the young girl Snow White. This storyteller is *omniscient*; like God, he knows all. He can focus on the young girl and tell us about her life and her dreams. He can focus on the evil queen and her machinations; and he can focus on the prince and the seven dwarves. He can go into each of the character's minds and bodies so we can see what each character thinks and feels. He can show us a scene in the queen's palace and in simultaneous time move to a scene in the woods with Snow White and the Dwarves. The mind of this omniscient narrator acts as a unifying device that holds all of the events together in a logical sequence of action.

CHANGING VIEWPOINT CHANGES THE STORY

However, change the viewpoint of the story and the story itself changes. If Snow White becomes the viewpoint character, we would only see events through her eyes. We would not know what the evil queen was doing back at the castle or what the dwarves were doing in the forest.

If the viewpoint character of Snow White were changed to that of the evil queen, or the prince, or any of the dwarves, a different story would result. If the evil queen became the main character, *the protagonist*, we would see all events from *her* point of view. Alone, afraid, and aging, the queen sees this stupid girl as a threat to her throne and her kingdom. If the prince were the protagonist, the events of the story would concern his efforts to bring the beautiful young girl back to life. If one of the dwarves were the protagonist that dwarf would have particular character traits (as the Disney version of the tale, Happy, Grumpy, Bashful, etc.), and the dwarf would concern himself with rescuing Snow White from the evil queen.

CHOOSING A MAIN CHARACTER

In deciding upon a main character, you have to ask yourself the question: who do I *sympathize* with the most? Also, *who* will achieve the goals set? Remember the story of the young girl who fell in love with the eligible young man? She wanted him very much. Her mother helps her to snare the young man by good advice, what kind of clothes and perfume to wear. Mother prepared a candlelit gourmet dinner for two, playing sensuous music. The girl got the man, but it was the *mother* who really solved the problem. Properly, it's the mother's story of all her efforts to help her young daughter land a husband.

POINT OF VIEW AND THE MAGIC CAMERA

Think of a writer as a cameraman who possesses a magic camera that is not only able to perceive visual images but also sensory perceptions, feelings, and thoughts. Shifting the magic camera produces different viewpoints. There are three major ways the camera can be used:

1. The first person narrator ("I" viewpoint).

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2. The effaced narrator:
 - (a) Second person focus (“you” viewpoint).
 - (b) Third person focus (“he” / “she” viewpoint).
3. The omniscient narrator (“God’s” viewpoint).

In first person the character tells the story. In second person and third person a hidden narrator (the effaced narrator) tells it. In omniscient the author acts as an all-seeing god who intrudes personal observations into the work. It is important to remember that **once the writer has selected a particular viewpoint (camera focus) the writer must stay in that viewpoint.** Each of the viewpoints has its respective advantages and disadvantages.

THE FIRST PERSON NARRATOR

Commonly called the “I” viewpoint, it has two modes:

1. First person fixed viewpoint.
2. First person agent narrator (peripheral narrator).

FIRST PERSON FIXED VIEWPOINT

When the hidden camera is locked to the mind of one person, recording his thoughts, feelings, and all events perceived, the camera technique is called the “fixed point of view.” In first person, the camera is locked to the “I” consciousness. An example of the “I” viewpoint is:

I had just come out of Harry’s bar when I saw her. She looked very thin, and her long auburn hair blew in ringlets against her gaunt face. I waved. She hesitated, her eyes widening, then she walked to me. She seemed sad, I thought, very sad. I wanted to tell her I still loved her, but I knew she would not believe me.

Here the camera is locked on the “I” protagonist, who is the central narrator, the “center of action”; and, like any human being, he has limitations. He can only *know* what is in his angle of vision. He perceives the girl, notices her reactions, and thinks particular thoughts. The viewpoint does not switch into the girl’s mind and record her thoughts. Therefore, it is important to remember, that when in fixed viewpoint one can only record the thoughts and emotions of the viewpoint character. Also if something is happening twenty miles away and the viewpoint character doesn’t know about it, then the author cannot introduce that material; it is something beyond the viewpoint character’s knowledge.

FIRST PERSON AGENT NARRATOR (PERIPHERAL NARRATOR)

The first person peripheral narrator is an eye witness to the events of the story. Sometimes this camera position is called the “storyteller” viewpoint, the narrator indicating he is going to tell the reader a story. In this mode the narrator may be the second most important character in the story or he may be merely an observer. He may be characterized in detail or very slightly. As he observes the protagonist, he may make value judgments, predictions, and interpretations. He may also be an accurate, trustworthy observer or in the case of many Russian novelists, a fallible one. He may even be a liar. If you choose to have a narrator tell a story “about someone else,” the narrator must have some relationship to the story, some “reason” for telling it. He must be changed in some way by the events. He should have *learned* something from the situation, or else why would he be telling the story at all?

A good example of the peripheral narrator is F. Scott Fitzgerald’s Nick Carraway in *The Great Gatsby*. Nick, a young Midwesterner, is dazzled by the rich young racketeer Jay Gatsby and tells the story of Gatsby’s life. Nick is drawn into Gatsby’s world of money, parties, and women. But Gatsby dies tragically. The parties over, and disillusioned, Nick returns to his Midwest home having “closed out” his interest “in the abortive sorrows and short-winded elations of men.” However, he is forever changed by Gatsby.

Joseph Conrad also uses a first-person peripheral narrator in his novella *Heart of Darkness*. Aboard the cruising yawl *Nellie*, four men, including the first-person narrator, listen to Marlow spin a seaman’s tale. Marlow tells of Kurtz, who epitomized the brightest light of civilization and who became a living incarnation of Satan. As Marlow finishes the tale, he reveals his relationship to Kurtz. Marlow too had “peeped over the edge” of that same black abyss of power and greed and he understood Kurtz’s temptation. Moreover, as a civilized white man he shares in Kurtz’s infamy. The other four men on the *Nellie* are equally touched and one of them (**the Director**) expresses their communal guilt, “We have lost the first of the ebb . . .”

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ADVANTAGES OF FIRST PERSON FIXED VIEWPOINT

Many new writers are attracted to the “I” viewpoint because:

1. It seems easiest to write directly in one’s own voice.
2. It offers easy identification with the protagonist (the “I” of the character seems to equal the “me” of the writer).
3. It offers a chance to explore the inner consciousness of a single person who is restricted in time and space, as is the average human being.
4. It has a vitality, an immediacy of life, no other viewpoint can offer. It is the voice of authority, to record an actual true life experience.

DISADVANTAGES OF FIRST PERSON VIEWPOINT

The very advantages of the “I” viewpoint are its dangers, however, for the “I” of the writer is *not* the “I” character. Consequently, the writer often:

1. Over identifies with the viewpoint.
2. Rambles.
3. Loses control of dramatic structure.
4. Writes the story “exactly as it happened.”
5. Includes irrelevant material and coincidences.

WHAT’S WRONG WITH WRITING A STORY EXACTLY AS IT HAPPENED?

The writer must be an *artist* selectively arranging the events of a story into a harmonic art form; some of the events may be true, some not. He must use only those events which will produce the most powerful story. Usually, if one writes a story “exactly the way it happened,” the story will be dull. The writer may take too much time to develop trivial things which are unimportant to the story, events, or occurrences which the author personally enjoys. Essentially, a writer must be conscious of *drama* and heighten events and even change them.

AVOID COINCIDENCES

Also, an incident that “really happened” may seem unbelievable. A recent news item told of a man who, while sitting in a truck, was killed by a crane that fell on him. While the newspaper reader will accept this *coincidence*, the fiction reader will not accept such an unmotivated happening to resolve a story. If a character is handily disposed of without proper explanation the reader will scoff that the events were too “pat,” too “easy.” What is “true” in life, will not seem “true” in fiction.

FIRST PERSON NOVELS TEND TO BE LESS SALEABLE

First person is often used in romance, true confessions, and adventure stories because it evokes the authenticity of a story, the feeling of “this actually happened to me.” However, most novels are written and sold in third person.

Readers determine the market and sizable number of readers argue that the many “I’s” which the protagonist uses make the protagonist sound conceited. It is also a statistical fact that fewer books are published in the first person. A large number of readers simply will not buy first person novels. Ask a reader why, and he will often say he does not wish to directly identify with the “I” character. After all, he is *not* the character. He prefers “more distance.” Editors are aware of these biases. Therefore, from a purely commercial viewpoint, if you choose first person, you may have less chance of

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publishing. From a literary perspective, however, first person is always a challenging viewpoint.

THE EFFACED NARRATOR

When the writer uses the invisible camera to move into any character's mind and to move from events happening in one place to events happening in another place, this technique is called "the effaced narrator" and sometimes the "roving narrator."

The effaced narrator is a hidden storyteller who acts as the substitute voice of the author. He is able to reveal the whole scope of the story and relate to it authoritatively, with knowledge and objectivity. While the narrator does not let his personality directly *intrude* into the story, the narrator's *bias* is always there. For the narrator only tells us particular incidents that have relevance to him as the teller of the tale.

In Casey Scott's *Ocean's Edge*, the third person narrator intends to foreshadow a violent love in the love of the protagonist Karen:

She stared down the gravel incline. A splotch of red in the dry grass rimming the rock caught her eye. Fur and blood drying in the sun—a small hare. The swift dive of a passing hawk. She looked away, shivering, deliberately fixing her mind on the whiteness of the seagulls. Behind her, sheer rock walls rose out of the sand. Everything about the land itself had a barbarous quality—bleak, stark; but very rich, sensual. Terribly bright, rapaciously so. A brilliantly raw beauty—but death just underneath. Not brooding or melancholy—just red, sudden; like the small rabbit. Part of the landscape.

A few minutes later, Karen meets the man who becomes her destructive lover. She is the hare, he the hawk. The incident has been orchestrated by the narrator.

NEVER CONFUSE THE NARRATOR WITH THE AUTHOR

It is a mistake to confuse the narrator's bias with that of the author. The author may be using a fallible narrator, or one who is deliberately lying or slanting events, as Dostoyevsky did. The author's reasons for writing the story, a creative process rooted in the unconscious, may be much different than the aims of the fictional narrator. Remember that the narrator is only a device to tell the story. Still, we do know the author by the themes, the value judgments he or she chooses to depict, and we are able to see the ideas which concern him or her.

SECOND PERSON

One mode of the effaced narrator is second person, the narrator speaking through the "you" viewpoint. What few books have published in second person remain a literary curiosity. Michael Butor's novel, *Chang of Heart*, is a rare example. Second person is more applicable in a short story and then only for a sequence. Second person may be used to make a character out of the reader:

You walk out of Harry's bar and you see her. She looks very thin, and her long auburn hair blows in ringlets around her face. You wave. She hesitates, her eyes widening. Then she walks to you. She seems sad, you think, very sad. You want to tell her you still love her, but you know she will not believe you.

However, second person may also be used to delineate a fictional character:

Cindy Hawkins—will you always walk down that winding dusty road, blushing and sweaty in your red tee shirt and torn blue jeans, or will you grow up some day to be one of those pale creatures in flowing skirts and teetering in high-heeled, pointed shoes?

Occasionally, a writer uses second person to address remarks to the reader. John Hawkins uses this device in his novel *The Lime Twig*:

Have you ever let lodgings in the winter? Was there a bed kept waiting, a corner room kept waiting for a gentleman? . . . Or perhaps you yourself were once the lonely lodger.

The difficulty with second person is that it is very hard to sustain over a long period of time. The "you" like the "I" viewpoint, can get monotonous if not handled right. Again, the reader may resent the direct identification with "you."

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Second person forces the reader to accept this viewpoint as his own. There is always the protest, *but I'm not walking out of Harry's bar and I don't want to, either.*

THIRD PERSON (THE "HE /SHE" POINT OF VIEW)

When the story is told in the third person, the point of view is inevitably that of either the effaced narrator or the omniscient narrator. The advantage of third person is that "he" or "she" provides an artistic screen which encourages the writer to keep an artistic distance and more effectively control and illuminate the characters. The effaced narrator can move his camera from one mind to another mind and can penetrate to the depths of each. He can pull back and see all events with an external objectivity. He can do what he wants to do, go where he wants to go, so long as he *knows* exactly what he's doing and where he's going. When the fictional camera is set in this viewpoint, the writer can use the camera three ways:

1. Effaced narrator as a fixed point of view on one consciousness.
2. Effaced narrator as a fixed point of view on externals alone.
3. Effaced narrator focusing on the consciousness of several characters and on simultaneous time sequences.

EFFACED NARRATOR AS A FIXED POINT OF VIEW, FOCUSING ON ONE CONSCIOUSNESS

In this variation, the effaced narrator locks on the consciousness of *one* character and records only what that character sees, thinks, and feels. The narrator objectively reports on all other characters and does not enter their minds nor interpret their thoughts. While the camera may microscopically analyze events, the effaced narrator will tell the story but will not intrude to make editorial comments:

He had just walked out of Harry's bar when he saw her. She looked very pretty, her long auburn hair blowing in ringlets about her tawny, oval face. He waved. She seemed sad, he thought, very sad. He want to tell her he still love her, but he knew she would not believe him, and he felt himself trembling.

Here, the reader shares the main character's position of not knowing all and so *participates* with the character, groping toward understanding.

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE

"Central Intelligence," formulated by Henry James, is a variation of this technique. In this mode the effaced narrator moves the camera to a closeup, focusing on the *psyche* of the narrator, and what the narrator perceives is the story. The narrator/hero tells the story, comments on it, evaluates it, and makes moral judgments. However, while the camera primarily focuses on the narrator's consciousness, the camera is also able to penetrate the minds of others around him, unlike the third person fixed viewpoint which cannot enter the minds of other characters. The hero's consciousness always remains in *center focus* and the other characters' thoughts and actions are only important inasmuch as they impinge on his consciousness. Necessarily the technique lends itself to introversion and introspection.

A good example of the technique is Henry James' short story "The Beast in the Jungle" in which John Marcher reflects:

He had thought to himself, so long ago as nobody knew, the most disinterested person in the world, carrying his concentrated burden, his perpetual suspense, ever so quietly, holding his tongue about it, giving others no glimpse of it nor of its effect on his life, asking of them no allowance and only making on his side all those were asked. He had disturbed nobody with the queerness of having to know a haunted man, though he had moments of rather special temptation on hearing people say they were "unsettled." If they were as unsettles as he was—he who had never been settled for an hour in his life—they would know what it meant.

Marcher thinks of the woman who loves him, May Bartram and the Central Intelligence delicately "shades" into her viewpoint:

So, while they grew older together, she did watch with him, and so she let this association give shape and

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colour to her own existence. Beneath her forms as well detachment had learned to sit, and behaviour had become for her, in the social sense, a false account of herself. There was but one account of her that would have been true all the while, and that she could give, directly, to nobody, least of all John Marcher.

STREAM OF CONSCIOUSNESS

If the effaced narrator focuses entirely on the mind of the protagonist, **stream of consciousness** results:

What was the time? he wondered, staring at the television screen. Products—underarm deodorant. . . Shattered fragments of splintered experiences. Shards of faces. Some loved, some detested. Moving pictures. . . pictures of eyes assessing him. Outstretched arms fading in mists. Those faces. . . Had they ever existed—or were they reflections of the private television set in his mind which he alone watched?

In stream of consciousness the camera records the workings of the mind, trying to capture the fragmented quality of thoughts. Often outside stimuli, a doorbell, a child's cry, a television set, precipitates various thoughts. There is no effort to be grammatical, to use complete sentences, though the writer should strive for clarity.

The effaced narrator may also record interior monologue, the character talking to himself:

Yes, he had been a fool. Everyone is a fool at eighteen. The world is waiting with all its glories and unseen traps. He had leaped into it all, leaped like any wild young animal, only to feel the steel jaws bite into his flesh. But he had somehow escaped—Yes, he had been lucky to escape.

Interior monologue is distinguished from stream of consciousness in that the character's thoughts are presented in complete sentences.

EFFACED NARRATOR AS A FIXED POINT OF VIEW, FOCUSING ON EXTERNALS ALONE

The effaced narrator may also freeze the camera in a locked position, to view the characters externally only and objectively report on what is said and done. The narrator does not interpret thoughts, make reflections or judgments:

The day was hot, sticky. Marie stopped in front of the boutique window, looking at the red dress. She hesitated. Reaching into her purse, she took out her wallet. She opened it, looked at the contents. Then, shaking her head, she put the wallet back into her purse and walked quickly away.

When the effaced narrator wields the camera in the fixed position, the reader can only understand the character through external actions and must infer what is going on in the character's mind. It's a good technique to use to develop suspense. As the reader cannot enter the character's mind, he does not know what is going to happen. Mystery writers often prefer this mode as it enables them to withhold vital information from the reader. However, if you use this viewpoint, you will have to "clue in" impending action so that the reader isn't startled by events which seem implausible because they lack motivation.

EFFACED NARRATOR FOCUSING ON THE CONSCIOUSNESS OF SEVERAL CHARACTERS AND ON SIMULTANEOUS TIME SEQUENCES

This particular point of view is the most popular among contemporary novelists because it is the most flexible and sophisticated. The effaced narrator may use the camera to explore the consciousness of as many characters as he wishes, interpreting their thoughts and actions. The camera may also focus on scenes which occur simultaneously in time and which are beyond the main character's knowledge. The author may use the camera to span time, focusing telescopically, panoramically, or historically.

There are several ways to handle viewpoint shifts gracefully. One way of doing it is by the *hiatus*—leaving four white spaces between the shifts:

Joel worried about her, where was she going? What would she do now? He looked at Nancy, wanting to comfort her.

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She drew her hand away, feeling sad. He was so protective; he just couldn't understand she had to be alone, to solve this herself.

A hiatus can indicate a change of time, place, or viewpoint. Remember, however, that many writers do not like to change viewpoint within the same paragraph or within the same sequence of action.

WHY EXCESSIVE VIEWPOINT SHIFTS ARE DANGEROUS

Changing the viewpoint in a short story is always a risk because the shift interrupts the unity of action. In novel writing, viewpoint shifts often occur at the chapter break, shifting from one character's mind to another or sometimes at strategic points within the chapter itself. Occasionally at tense moments of emotion, particularly in sex scenes, the writer may elect to change viewpoint within a paragraph.

In the mystery novel, shifts of the camera are expected and occur frequently, from the police lieutenant to the murderer to the victim and into the minds of other related characters. On the other hand, in most romance novels the camera usually remains focused on the heroine.

Viewpoint Shifts Tend to be Confusing

One of the major reasons new writers receive so many rejection slips is excessive viewpoint shifts. Examine this incorrect passage:

Jeremy wanted to tell her how much he loved her but he could not. It was better she just forget about him. He saw Ann watching him. She felt hurt, wanted to cry. Why was he always so distant? She remembered her father, Jeremy had the same coldness. He decided this would be the last time he was going to see her. She would never accept a convict for a husband. She knew something was bothering him, but what?

The constant shifting back and forth between the two minds not only is confusing, but it's distracting. You do not have to enter another character's mind to know what he or she is thinking. The main character can "intuit" a great deal. Note how much clearer the passage is in one viewpoint:

Jeremy wanted to tell her how much he loved her but he could not. It was better she just forget about him. He saw Ann watching him. He knew she felt hurt, wanted to cry. He saw the reproach in her eyes, that he was distant, like her father. He decided this would be the last time he was going to see her—she would never accept a convict for a husband. He realized she knew something was bothering him, but he also knew she did not have the courage to ask him what it was.

Jeremy can notice facial features and expressions. He can "know," can "realize" things about Ann. When we know a person well, we often know what a person is thinking. Even if we don't know a person well, we can tell by facial expressions and body language what that person is thinking. Words like he "understood," he "intuited," he "surmised," enable the protagonist to reveal another character's mind. Also phrases like she "seemed troubled," "seemed as if she were about to cry," "looked downcast," enable the writer to reveal a character's thought without changing viewpoint.

Always Ask Yourself "Is This Viewpoint shift Necessary?"

In general, you will probably do your strongest and most powerful writing within sequences of a single viewpoint. While literary writers like to experiment with viewpoint shifts, commercial writers who write for a mass market audience are aware that the average reader is confused by the shifts and so they often opt to write more conventionally.

OMNISCIENT VIEWPOINT (GOD'S VIEWPOINT)

If the author intrudes into the story with mock conversations, editorial comments, making moral judgments, and forecasts of the future, the viewpoint technique is called "omniscient." Eighteenth and nineteenth century writers such as Fielding, Thackeray, and Trollope often stopped the action in their novels to directly address the reader with their "Dear Reader" remarks.

Like the effaced narrator/roving narrator the omniscient narrator can enter any character's mind at will, interpreting the thoughts and actions of the character. The author may use the camera as a device to span time and to focus on scenes which are beyond the main character's knowledge. As editorial omniscient author he may tell the reader what to

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think, intruding to voice judgments and universal truths. He can combine all of these devices with objective reporting.

Omniscient viewpoint is often called “God’s viewpoint” because the author, like God, can enter anybody’s mind at will. Remember, however, that the reader tends to identify with one character and experience events through that character’s mind. If you switch viewpoints at will, the reader is often distracted, and loses track of the story line. Also omniscient kills suspense. If you go into every character’s mind, the reader no longer looks forward to the coming action; rather he *knows* what is going to happen.

Writers often use omniscient viewpoint to open a short story or novel because it is easier to set a scene or describe a character. For, once in viewpoint, it is difficult for a character to think of himself in the terms that the omniscient observer might use: “he was a handsome, susceptible man, extraordinarily attractive to women, dashing, witty, and totally fascinating.”

Most writers generally open with the effaced narrator describing a scene, introducing and describing a character. Then the narrator slips into the characters mind, into third person fixed point of view, and continues the story. Tolstoy used the omniscient viewpoint in his novel *War and Peace*, interrupting the story with essays on war:

The first fifteen years of the nineteenth century in Europe present an extraordinary movement of millions of people. Men leave their customary pursuits, hasten from one end of Europe to the other, plunder and slaughter one another, triumph and are plundered into despair, and for some years the whole course of life is altered. . . What was the cause of this movement, by what laws was it governed?

This device of the author intruding to philosophize, reflect, and give historical background is not fashionable in twentieth century writing because contemporary writers prefer the dramatic form of writing and do not like to interrupt the action of the story. Today, this type of information is usually given by a character, either through his thoughts or dialogue, in the vocabulary or thought pattern of the particular character. To avoid a stilted, dull, summary of facts ask yourself *how* would your character say this? How would he think it?

The main difference between the omniscient viewpoint and the effaced narrator is author intrusion.

CAMERA POSITIONS WHICH THE EFFACED NARRATOR MAY USE

1. Panoramic View

The panoramic view is a wide lens shot of the setting:

Wind rippled the lake’s surface into grey wavelets. Wet red leaves splattered the yellow grass. The cold white sun moved behind scudding, thick grey clouds. The air hung damp and chill from the early morning rain.

2. Focusing on Subject (External Long Shot):

The camera moves in on a subject, viewing a subject from a distance:

A boy slipped from the birch woods, walked to the edge of the water. He knelt at the shoreline.

3. Focusing on Subject (External Medium Shot):

The camera moves in closer, so that more detail, such as clothing and body build are apparent:

He wore a red windbreaker zipped to his chin and blue jogging pants with a stripe down the sides. The slender boy looked about fifteen. He carried a long stick, which he poked into the water.

4. Focusing on Subject (External Close Up):

This camera position reveals fine detail, such as facial features and expression:

His long dark hair fell into his almond shaped eyes. He poked the water. The pale gold skin of his high forehead wrinkled with the intensity of the moment until he sat back on his heels, smiling.

5. Moving into the Subjects Peripheral Consciousness:

The camera now enters the subject’s mind, but only enough to reveal his state of mind.

The gun moved under the point of the stick there. He wallowed in satisfaction, but he fought down his fear, too. He knew the murderer.

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6. Moving into Subject's Thoughts:

If he finds out that I know, they'll kill me too. What should I do? If I go to the police, they'll know for sure. If I don't go to the police, they'll kill again . . . and again. I can stop it. And—what about Mom and Dad? They're in as much danger as I am . . .

7. Recording Dialogue:

"Dammit—why did this happen to me! If only I'd never met her. If only I'd never walked into Shelley's that night—"

By practicing these various camera shots of the effaced narrator, one can develop the ability to move gracefully into the story, setting scene and introduction of a character.

THE EPISTOLARY NOVEL

In this type of novel, the narrator is achieved by a series of letters written to someone or by letters written back and forth between two or more characters. Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* is considered the first of this genre. A contemporary epistolary novel is Elizabeth Forsythe Hailey's *A Woman of Independent Means*. The novel begins:

December 19, 1899
Honey Grove, Texas

Dear Rob,
I have just asked Miss Appleton to put us on the same team for the spelling bee. Since we're the only two people in the fourth grade who can spell *perspicacious*, our team is sure to win. Can you come over after school? The gardener is clearing the hollyhock bed so there will be more room to play tag. It was my idea.

Bess

THE MONOLOGUE NOVEL

The writer may use a reader to address the reader in a long monologue that forms the novel. In Albert Camus' *The Fall*, Camus' main character introduces himself as Jean-Baptiste Clamence and says:

Pleased to know you. You are in the business, no doubt? In a way? Excellent reply! Judicious too: in all things we are merely "in a way." But cultured bourgeois! Smiling at the use of the subjective, in fact, proves your culture twice over because you recognize it to begin with and then because you feel superior to it.

The entire book is made up of Clamence's monologue; no other characters dramatically interact with him, although he tells the reader about various people.

THE JOURNAL/DIARY NOVEL

Often a ruse of this *confessional* novel is a preface that explains the *journal* or *diary* was found in an ancient castle or monastery.

Sholem Asch's narrator in *The Nazarene*, is shown a "document which has been hidden from the world for nineteen hundred years . . ." and which "contain the complete truth concerning that world-tragedy which was enacted in Jerusalem." The narrator translates the ancient document and the translation is a novel.

One of the most famous diary novels is Dostoyevsky's *Notes From Underground* which begins:

I am a sick man . . . I am a spiteful man. I am an unattractive man. I believe my liver is diseased. However, I know nothing at all about my disease, and do not know for certain what ails me. I don't consult a doctor for it, and never have. . . I know better than anyone that. . . I am only injuring myself . . . But still, if I don't consult a doctor it is from spite. My liver is bad, well—let it get worse!

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Summary

Choosing the correct viewpoint in your story is a crucial decision. You have to decide who your main character is and from whose eyes the events will be perceived. For, while the main character is usually the viewpoint character, occasionally he is not. You may choose to use:

1. First person fixed (the “I” viewpoint) or first-person peripheral narrator
2. The effaced narrator (hidden narrator who tells the story)
 - a. Second person (“you” viewpoint):
 - i. Reader as “you” character.
 - ii. Fictional character as “you”.
 - b. Third person (“he/she” viewpoint)
 - i. Effaced narrator, fixed viewpoint, only entering one character’s mind and reporting about all the other characters.
 - ii. Effaced narrator focusing on Central Intelligence—psyche of character—and penetrating minds of others only as they impinge on the character’s consciousness.
 - iii. Effaced narrator, camera frozen in a fixed position and only recording external features and movements.
 - iv. Effaced narrator/roving narrator, allows simultaneous time sequences and switching into other characters viewpoints.
3. The omniscient narrator who knows all (God’s viewpoint) and who intrudes to make comments, reflections, and value judgments. Rarely used in contemporary writing.

Some Do’s and Don’ts

1. Don’t switch from one character’s mind to another indiscriminately or carelessly. It confuses the reader. The main character can *intuit* what others are thinking. If you need to switch, don’t do it in the same paragraph or the same sequence of action unless you have very compelling circumstances.
2. Consider using a hiatus to signal shifts, or shifting at the chapter break.
3. Don’t stop the action of your story to put in large blocks of facts or historical background. Try to work these things in gracefully in thoughts, dialogue, letters, newspaper headlines, radio/tv announcements.
4. Don’t have your character *know* things he could not possibly know. For example, if something is happening twenty miles away then how could he be aware of it?
5. Once you choose a viewpoint strategy, stick with it. Be consistent.
6. Avoid author intrusion, making editorial comments, value judgments.

Basic elements to Consider in Choosing a viewpoint

Some questions you need to answer are:

1. Does the viewpoint you have chosen tell the story from the most sympathetic angle of vision?
2. Will the choice of this particular viewpoint enable you to write the most scenes that you really want to write?
3. Does this viewpoint permit the character to make the major decisions in attaining the goals you’ve set?

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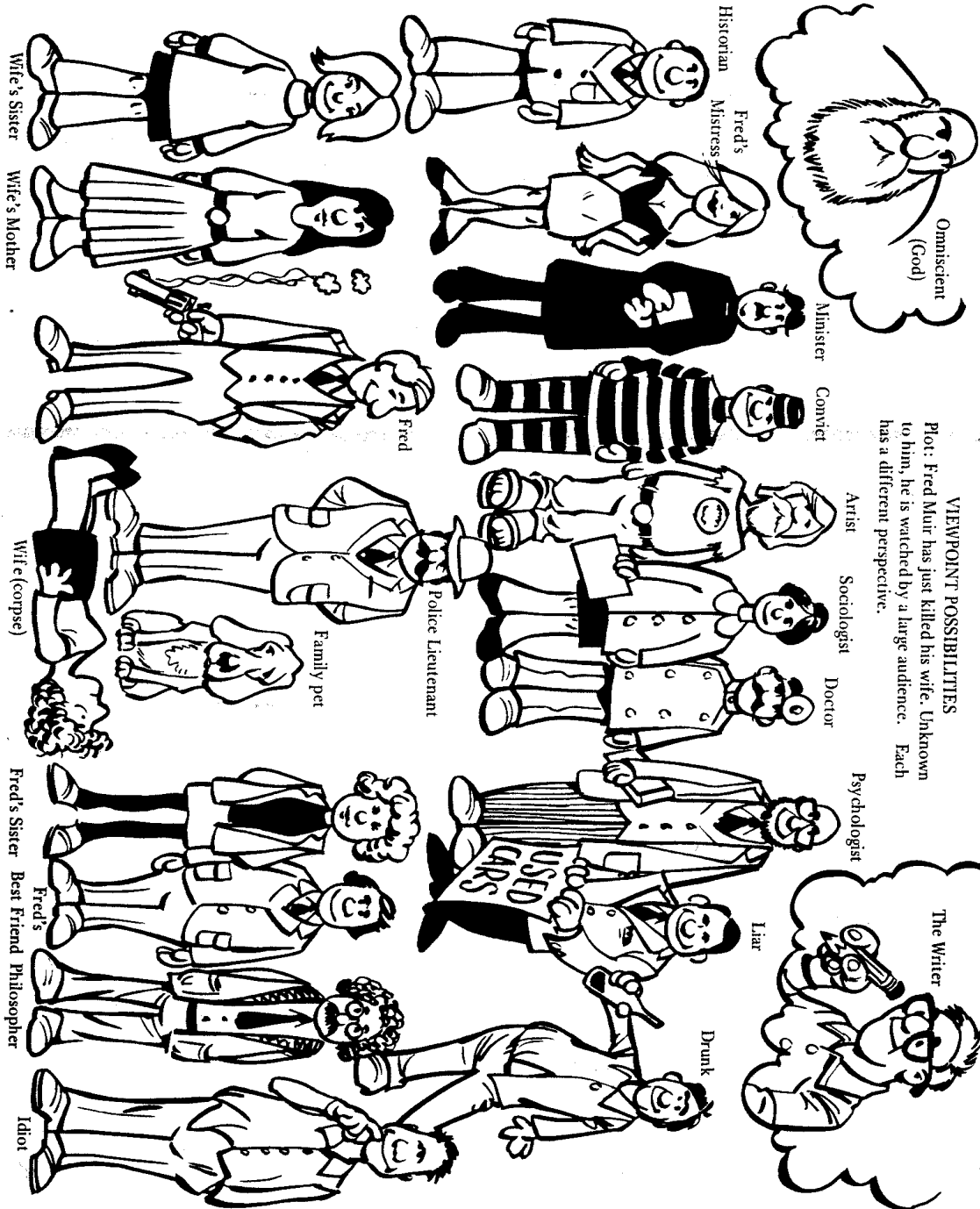
4. Does this viewpoint enable you to write the story without backtracking a lot to give information? Does it afford a minimum of narration (straight telling)? Will this viewpoint allow you to get right into the action?
5. Do you know this character to the point that he or she will not lead you into areas which you know nothing about? For example, you may want to write a book about a neurosurgeon but if you don't know anything about neurosurgery you may find yourself unable to complete the book.
6. Which viewpoint offers you the most *satisfaction* in telling your story?

Exercise (The Fred Muir diagram is on the last page of this handout)

1. Using the Fred Muir diagram, choose any character; write a sketch in third person focusing on one consciousness.
2. Write a love scene consciously using the effaced narrator in any one of the third person modes.
3. Using the Fred Muir diagram, write a scene for the omniscient viewpoint, going into as many viewpoints as you wish, and include a universal truth that you as author wish to convey.
4. Write a one-page sketch, consciously using first person central intelligence. An interesting viewpoint might be that of the corpse in the Fred Muir diagram.
5. Using the Fred Muir diagram, write a sketch from the effaced narrator's point of view, focusing on externals only.
6. Write one paragraph of stream consciousness and one paragraph of interior monologue. Note the difference.

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VIEWPOINT POSSIBILITIES
 Plot: Fred Muir has just killed his wife. Unknown to him, he is watched by a large audience. Each has a different perspective.