**Characters & Viewpoints by Orson Scott Card**

# 16 First Person Narrative

* When you use a first-person narrator, you are almost required to tell the story in someone else’s voice-the voice of the character telling the tale. A careless writer will have all her first-person narrators talk amazingly like herself, but if you take characterization seriously, the use of first person will lead you to discover a new voice for each story told by a different narrator.
* But by and large you should attempt to create the narrator’s voice through his attitude and implied past, letting the speech reflect his educational level and regional accent only in syntax and word choice, not in odd spellings or endless pronunciation guides.
* The main limitation on the first-person narrative is that your narrator has to be present to the key scenes. A first-person narrator who merely hears about the major events of the story is no good to you at all. So you have to work your narrator into the action so tightly that he is present whenever you need him to observe something.
* Arthur Conan Doyle chose well in deciding not to have Sherlock Holmes narrate his own stories. Using Watson as narrator allowed Doyle to withhold information from the audience without being unfair. Holmes knew certain information, but Watson didn’t, so Watson could tell us all that he knew in the order he found it out, without spoiling the surprise. Since Watson never knows as much as Holmes, neither do we.
* The narrator’s voice is your great asset-and your greatest drawback. Your first-person narrator can’t be a bore, or you r story will be boring. She can’t describe herself performing noble acts, or she will seem vain for having told the tale at all. Yet you can tell us much about your narrator by showing him do a brave, heroic act without him giving us a sign that he realizes the act was heroic at all. Or he can do something terrible, all the while explaining exactly why his crime was not a crime at all, but a necessary act-while we listen in horror.
* We may not love this character, but we know him better from hearing his version of his action than we ever would by hearing them described by someone else. This passage ostensibly defends the narrator’s mistreatment of his wife, but in fact it reveals very clearly his monstrous misconception of the way other people think and feel. That’s one of the best reasons to use first person-to let us live for a while in a strange or twisted world, to see the world as someone else sees it. Yet because the narrator is not the author, but rather a character, the readers know that the author doesn’t necessarily agree with the narrator. In fact, in this passage, if I handled the irony properly, it should be clear to a late-twentieth-century reader that the author is completely out of sympathy with the narrator.
* In choosing a first-person narrator you should have in mind what his reason is for telling the tale; tale-telling is part of his character;. Whether you explain her purpose or not, knowing it yourself will help you shape and control the presentation of the story; it will help establish which events the character would tell and which she would leave out, which she would lie about and which she would tell straight.
* Switching first-person narrators in mid-story is usually ineffective and always difficult, because it violates the illusion that the character is “really” telling the tale. But if you find you must change narrators, it helps to give your readers some clue. For instance, if the first eight chapters are narrated by Nora, you might put in a division page that says, “Part I: Nora.” When Pete takes over as narrator, again you put in a page that is blank except for the words “Part II: Pete.” Or you could establish multiple narrators in a frame-both characters are present in the bar or the courtroom, and we expect both to tell their parts of the story.
* One thing Gavin is wrestling with in *The Last Film of Emile Vico* is a problem that comes with all first-person narrators: the problem of time. The narrator, as a participant in the events, is telling about what happened in the *past*. He is looking backward. He is distant in time from the story itself.

Contrast this with the third-person narrator. Even though most third-person accounts are told in past tense, they feel quiet immediate. There is not necessarily any sense of the narrator *remembering* the events. They are recounted as they are experienced. There is no distance in time.

However, with third person there is distance in space. That is the narrator, though she can dip into one or more minds, is never a person who is actually there. She is always an invisible observer, always at some distance.

So first person is distant in time, third person in space. Consciously or not, storytellers struggle to break down both barriers and achieve immediacy. The use of present tense and stream of consciousness were attempts to bridge the first-person time barrier-with little success, I might add, since both techniques tend to drive away the vast majority of the potential audience. The use of deep penetration in the limited third person is an attempt to break down the barrier of space in that narrative voice, and it works very well; thus it has become the most widely used narrative approach.

* One technical problem with the most fist-person stories, arising out of distance of time, is that the narrator knows the end of the story. There’s really nothing to stop him from announcing it from the start.
* This is not the problem it might be, because the contemporary community of writers and readers has developed a convention for dealing fairly with the reader in first-person stories. Readers allow the first-person narrator to withhold the ending, as long as he tells us at each stage in the story all that the character knew at that point in time
* The fact that the narrator is telling the story at all makes it obvious that whatever risks she went through in the course of the story, she lived through it, so putting the narrator in jeopardy of death won’t be terribly convincing. There are other kinds of jeopardy, though, that can still work fine. While the first-person narrator can’t die, that doesn’t mean the terrible, irrevocable things can’t happen to her. In Stephen King’s *Misery*, one of the horrors of the books is that the narrator, though he obviously survived, still lost limbs and other appendages to his mad captor’s blade. When his captor threatened to do awful things to him, we knew that those awful things could actually happen; the jeopardy was quite convincing.
* All these drawbacks to first-person narrative are problems that arise when you handle first person *well*. Alack, I’m forced to tell you the sad truth that first person is very difficult. Through first person is usually the first choice of the novice storyteller, since it seems so simple and natural, it is considerably harder to handle well than third person, so that the novice usually betrays himself.
* I don’t need to go on, do I? There is no way in the world that the first-person narrator can possibly know what is worrying Nora, or her motives as she converses with other people. Still, he *might* be merely guessing at her thoughts or motives-until we get to the last sentence, where he gets inside her head for a flashback. This is simply impossible-it is a technique of third-person narrative, one which is completely unavailable to first-person narrators unless they happen to have supernatural powers. Yet you would be amazed how many young writers make this mistake.
* The flaw here isn’t that the passage is cold and melodramatic by turns-though of course it is. The flaw is that the first-person narrator is watching himself as if from a distance, not seeing inside his own head at all. He sees *what* he does, but never *why*. We watch him as if through a camera-but since he is the narrator, he wouldn’t *watch* himself do these things, he would remember them from the inside.
* If there is any point to using a first-person narrator, it is in order to experience everything through his perceptions, colored by his attitudes, driven by his motives-yet we got nothing of that in this sample. This supposedly first-person account is as impersonal as a phone book. It is also exactly what a majority of novices do when writing first-person accounts.
* First-person narration *must* reveal the narrator’s character or it isn’t worth doing. The narrator must be the kind of person who would tell the tale, and her motives and attitudes must show up in the story. If you find that you can’t do this, then you have three choices: you can admit that first-person narrative isn’t going to work in this story, and switch to third person; invent your first-person character and create her voice by discovering her attitudes, motives, expectations, and past; or experiment with other first-person narrators until you find one whose character you *can* create.

# 17 Third Person

* Most writers don’t actually think of themselves as God. We are much too humble for that. But within the world of our story, we do have nearly absolute power. Our characters live and die by our decisions; their families and friendships, location and livelihood depend on our whims. They go through the most terrible suffering because we thought it would be more interesting if they did, and just when they finally settle down to live a normal life again, we close the book and snuff them out.

Unfortunately, all that godlike power is usually used in private. We may be manipulating our characters like tormented puppets through the landscape of our own demented minds, but we conceal all that from our readers. All our artistry as performers of fiction is designed to give the audience the illusion that our characters do what they do for their own reasons, that our story is natural, believable series of events.

The only time we can act out our godlike role in front of the audience is when we write using the third-person omniscient point of view.

* As an omniscient narrator, you float over the landscape wherever you want, moving from place to place in the twinkling of an eye. You pull the reader along with you like Superman taking Lois Lane out for a flight, and whenever you see something interesting, you explain to the reader exactly what’s going on. You can show the reader every character’s thoughts, dreams, memories, and desires; you can let the reader see any moment of the past or future.

The limited third-person narrator, on the other hand, doesn’t fly freely over the landscape. Instead, the limited narrator is led through the story by one character, seeing only what that character sees; aware of what that characters (the “viewpoint character”) thinks and wants and remembers, but unable to do more than guess at any other character’s inner life. You *can* switch viewpoint characters from time to time, but trading viewpoints requires a clear division-a chapter break or a line space. The limited third-person narrator can never change viewpoints in mid-scene.

* The limited narrator can also change viewpoint characters. Not in midscene or even mid-paragraph, as the omniscient narrator does, but from one scene to another, as long as there is a clear transitional break. The most obvious transitional break, and therefore the one that works best, is the chapter break. If chapter one is from Pete’s point of view-with his worries about asking Nora out for a date, his preparation for the “final exam” and so on-then chapter two can be from Nora’s point of view. We’ll remember how anxious Pete was to keep “delicate” Nora from guessing that he was really a beer0drinking jock, so as we see the date from Nora’s point of view, with her memories of her brothers playing roughly in the yard, her longing to talk football and drink beer in a bar, we’ll get most of the delicious irony of knowing the truth about two characters who are deceiving each other too well.

But what if you want to write a short story, not a book? Can’t you switch viewpoint characters without having to resort to a chapter structure?

Yes. The next-clearest transitional device in fiction is the “line space”-a double-double space if you work on a typewriter, two hard carriage returns if you work on a word processor. It looks like this:

In your manuscript, however, you must mark a line space so the typesetting and layout will know that it’s a deliberate space that should appear in the finished book. Usually a line space is marked in manuscript with three asterisk, like this:

\* \* \*

The asterisks will usually appear in the finished book or magazine only if the line space falls at a page break. The rest of the time they’ll be deleted, leaving only a blank line.

The first part of our story, using Pete as the viewpoint character, ends with a line space. Readers are trained to recognize a line space as a signal that a major change is taking place in the story-a change of location, a long passage of time, or a change in viewpoint character. However, you must be careful that you establish what the change is *immediately* after the line space. The first sentence should use Nora’s name and make it clear that the narrator is now following her point of view. The first paragraph should also let us know, directly or by implication, where she is and how long it has been since the events just before the line space.

* A change of viewpoint character is the most difficult transition for readers to make. (All right, a jump of 900 years and a change of planet might be harder, but usually time and place changes are a matter of a few days and a few miles.) It’s a lot easier for readers to adapt to the viewpoint change if they have already met the new viewpoint character, and it’s even easier if the new viewpoint characters is already very important in the story. In this case, because the section from Pete’s viewpoint is focused on his feelings and plans for Nora, we won’t have any confusion at all when the section immediately after the line space begins:

Nora had never seen nouvelle cuisine before. To her the half-empty plate looked like someone in the kitchen had decided to put her on a diet. Had Pete called ahead to tell them she was too fat or something?

Since the section before focused on Pete’s upcoming date with Nora, readers will remember easily who Nora is, and will have little trouble guessing from this opening that Nora is now out on the date with Pete.

Just as important is the fact that this paragraph immediately establishes Nora’s point of view. In the last section, we would have become used to seeing everything from Pete’s perspective, getting his thoughts and attitudes and memories. The first sentence after line break gives us information about Nora that Pete would not know-her unfamiliarity with nouvelle cuisine. His point of view has been clearly violates; hers is being clearly established. The second sentence gives her attitude-her humorously paranoid guess about the chef’s motive for putting such a small amount of food on a plate. And to complete the viewpoint shift, the third sentence starts showing us Pete, our previous viewpoint character, only this time from her point of view-her uncertainty about how he is judging her. Since Pete’s viewpoint section would have shown us how he practically worshipped Nora and thought she was the most fragile, beautiful woman he’d ever known, having Nora speculate that Pete might think she was too fat lets us know that Nora’s self-image is wildly different from Pete’s image of her. The viewpoint shift is complete in three sentences, and readers will settle in comfortably with Nora’s point of view.

* The omniscient narrator can tell more story and reveal more character in less time than it takes the limited third-person narrator. That's the greatest advantage of the omniscient narrator.
* If the limited narrator takes so much longer to do the same job as the honesty and narrator, why do we need the limited third person narrator at all? Why, for heavens sake, is limited third person the overwhelmingly dominant narrator voice in American fiction today?
* It's a matter of distance. As the omniscient narrator slips in and out of different characters minds, he keeps the reader from fully engaging with any of the characters. The amnesty and passage quoted above is far more presentational the representational – we're constantly being reminded that the narrators telling us a story about Pete and Nora. We never did deeply and enough involved with either them to fully identify with them, to begin to fill with their feeling. Instead of sharing Nora's frustration or Pete's bafflement, we are forced to take a distant, ironic, unused stamps, watching what they do but not experiencing it.
* The limited third person strategy is to trade time for distance. Sure, we spend more time getting through the same out of story, but in return we get a much deeper, more intense involvement with the lives of the viewpoint characters. The honesty and narrator is always there, tugging at our hands, pulling us from place to place. We see everything and everybody as the narrator sees, not as the character seat. We are always outside looking in
* think of the limited third person narrator is a combination of the most important representational features of the honesty and an first-person narrators. The limited narrator gets much closer to the viewpoint characters than the omniscient narrator can, giving readers the experience of living in the characters world – much the way the first-person narrator gives readers an intimate look at the world through the narrator's eyes. At the same time, with limited third person narration the viewpoint character isn't actually telling the story, constantly reminding us that he is showing us himself, that he's looking back on these events from some point in the story's future.
* Pete got to work at seven 1530 could leave the flower and the card for nor without anybody watching. He filled the bud vase with water from the drinking fountain, put the daffodil in it, said that based on Nora's desk, and lien be able against it. It looked to formal, but the proposal of marriage or an apology or something. So he took the card out of the envelope. That was better. But they still bothered him – it would put too much pressure on her. If she turned him down, she could just throw away a flower, but she might feel like she had to return the vase. So he took the daffodil out of the vase and laid it on her desk. It got water all over her blotter. He grabbed a handful of her tissues and dabbed up the water and dried the stem of the flower. He laid down the card so it mostly cover the water spots and put the daffodil as an angle across the card. Then he wrapped the vase in the wet tissues, carried it to his office, and put it in the wastebasket.
* Were getting experience here that the honesty and version didn't provide – were living through Pete's indecision and nervousness step-by-step, moment by moment. Even though it's in past tense, feels like the present. Where a dead identifying with Pete as we live through all the agonizing, trivial, yet vital strategic decisions in his campaign to give nor exactly the right impression.
* Which type of narrator should you use? By now it should be clear that none is intrinsically, absolutely better than the others. All have been used by excellent writers to tell wonderful tells. But it still matters very much which one you choose. Here are some things to keep in mind.
* 1. First-person and amnesty and narrations are by nature more presentational and limited third person – readers will notice the narrator more. If your goal is to get your readers emotionally involved with your main characters, with minimal distraction from the police in the story, the limited third person narrator is your best choice.
* 2. If you're writing humor, however, first-person or I'm missing it narration can help you create comic distance. These intrusive narrators can make the right comments or write with the kind of wit that calls attention to itself, without jarring or surprising a reader who is deeply involved with the characters.
* 3. If you want brevity, covering great spans of time and space were many characters without writing hundreds or thousands of pages to do it, the honesty and narrator may be your best choice.
* 4. If you want the sense of truth that comes from an eyewitness account, first-person usually fills less fictional, more factual.
* 5. If you're uncertain of your ability as a writer, while you're quite confident of the strength of the story, the limited third person narration invites a clean, unobtrusive writing style – a plane to help paint plainly told. You can still write beautifully using the limited third person, but your writing is more likely to be ignored – thus covering a multitude of sins. However, if you know you can write dazzling prose but the story itself is often your weakness, the honesty and am the first person invite you to play with language even if it distracts a bit from the tell itself. In limited third person you can't have those lovely digressions that make Vonnegut, for instance, such a delight to read.
* It's no accident that the overwhelming majority of fiction published today uses the limited third person narrator. Most readers read for the sake of the story. They want to immerse themselves in the lives of the characters, and for that purpose, the limited third person is the best. It combines the flexibility of Ole Miss events with the intensity of the first-person. It's also an easier choice for beginning writer, partly because it doesn't require the same level of mastery of the language, and partly because it will simply be more familiar and therefore feel more natural to writers who have grown up in a literary community where limited third person predominates.
* Once you've decided to write a limited third person narration, you still have a choice to make: how deeply penetrate the viewpoint character's mind. Look at figure 1, which represents the honesty and point of view. The cameras looking down on the scene – he can see everything. The dotted lines represent the narrator's ability to also show us everything going on inside every character's head – but we always see the scene as a whole from the narrator's point of view, and the narrator is not in the scene we're never inside the scene; we're always watching from a distance.
* Figure 2 represents the first-person narration. Now we see inside only one character's head, the narrator in the story, and we see only what the narrator saw, spritzing the world as he experienced it – but we still watch from a distance, because it is all told from the perspective of the present narrator recounting events in his past. Even though the present narrator and the narrator of the story are the same person, there still goals between them.
* The limited third person narration is like first person in that we see only the scenes that the viewpoint character is in, and see only the viewpoint characters my; it's like I'm missing it's in that we see the action of the story unfolding now instead of remembering it later. We are not far separate from the action in either space or time.
* But how deeply have we penetrated the viewpoint character's mind? Figure 3 is like penetration; we can see inside the viewpoint character's mind, we observe only scenes where the viewpoint character is present – but we don't actually experience the scenes as if we were seeing them the viewpoint character's eyes. The narrator tells what happens in the scene in a neutral voice, only giving us the viewpoint characters attitudes when the narrator turns away from the scene and it's the viewpoint characters my.
* Figure 4 shows deep penetration, in which we do experience the scenes as if we were seeing them through the viewpoint character's eyes. We don't see things as they really happened, we see them only as Pete thinks they happen. We are so closely involved with the viewpoint characters thoughts that we'll have to dip into his mind; we never really leave.
* In the deep penetration version, we never needed tag like Pete thought, because were getting his thoughts all on. The phrase of course in the first sentence is not the narrators, and, it's Pete's. The passage of blue dress. No not just blue. Vivid blue... He is not the narrator commenting on the dress – it's Pete who's judging what Nora wears.
* When Pete says terrific and smiles, the light penetration version sees his smile from the outside; the deep penetration version is more like first-person, telling us something about the motivation behind the smile: Pete has to force himself to smile.
* Where the light penetration version tells us that Nora study Pete's face before she realized he was lying, the deep penetration passes says that Nora repeats mine. We know, of course, that Nora can't really repeats mind; axis the way fills to Pete. With deep penetration, the viewpoint characters attitudes colors everything that happens. I like first-person, however, were getting the viewpoint characters attitude at the time of the events, not his memory of that attitude or his attitude as he looks back on the event.
* Figure 5 shows another alternative: the cinematic point of view. In this version of limited third person, we only see with the viewpoint character is present to see – we never see inside his or anyone else's head. It is as if the narrator were movie camera looking over the viewpoint character shoulder, going where he goes, turning when he turns, noticing what he knows – but never showing anything but what the eye can see, never hearing anything but what the ear can hear.
* Cinematic narration gives no attitude, except as it is revealed by facial expressions, gestures, pauses, words. We learn that Pete is used to Nora's weakness only because he immediately sits down to wait instead of looking for her calling to see where she is. We learn that Nora's dress is new only by implication, which turns around once and asked if he likes it. The cinematic narrator can't tell us that he thinks addresses like blue neon, nor are we told Pete fills nor can read his mind.
* The dividing lines between cinematic, light penetration, and deep penetration narrators are not firm. You can drift along with light penetration, then slipped into deep penetration or a cinematic view without any kind of transition, and readers usually won't notice the process. The Lotus the result, however.
* Deep penetration is intense, hot narration; no other narrative strategy keeps the reader so closely involved with the character and the story. But the viewpoint characters attitude is so pervasive that it can be, knowing or exhausting if carried too far, and the narrative isn't terribly reliable, since the viewpoint character maybe Ms. misunderstanding or misjudging everyone he meets and everything that happens.
* Cinematic narration is cool and distance, but it shares some of the virtues of the camera – you can believe what you see, and if you misinterpret the gestures and expressions and words of the characters, that's your problem – the narrator never lies. The complete lack of attitude, however, can become frustrating. The real camera shows real faces and scenes, and even the most explicit and detailed cinematic narration can't come close to the completeness in detail and figure at action the folding screen.
* I found of the best results come when you find a comfortable middle ground and then let the needs of the story determine how deeply you penetrate the viewpoint characters my. In some scenes still get hot and penetrate deeply, letting the audience feel that they become the viewpoint character. In some scenes o'clock, the audience retreat from the character who watch things passively for a while. In between, you'll use light penetration to keep us aware of the constant possibility of seeing into the viewpoint character spots, so we aren't startled when things get hot again.
* You've got to be aware, though, of the full range of possibilities. I see many student stories – and more than a few publish stories as well – which the rider unconsciously got into a rut and stayed cool love story cried out for her to get hot, or stayed hot with the action was intense enough to need the penetration. I see many other stories in which the writer Using he thought/she thought tags when we were so deeply into the character that even such tiny intrusions by the narrator were distracting and unnecessary.
* No one level penetration is likely to be right for a whole story. The use of cinematic narration is a con system strategy for entire stories has been invoked in recent years, the mistaken notion that fiction can be improved by imitating film. The resulting fiction is almost always lame, since there isn't a writer alive whose prose is so good it can replace a camera the WebCam or does best TE in an entire moment at a glance. It takes a writer too many words to try to create that moment – after three paragraphs it is in a moment anymore. The ironic thing is that cinematographers and film directors have struggled for years to try to make up for their inability to do fiction does so easily: tell us what's going on inside a character's mind. How they struggle with camera angles and shadows! How the actors struggle with words and pauses, with the gentlest changes in expression, the slightest of gestures – all to convey the audience what the fiction writer can express easily in a sentence or phrase of deep penetration into the viewpoint characters my.
* I suspect, however, that one reason some writers resort – often inadvertently – to the cinematic viewpoint is that they don't know their viewpoint character well enough to show his attitude toward anything. They start writing without first inventing their characters, instead of inventing and exploiting them as they go along, they avoid their characters entirely, showing us only the most superficial or of gestures, telling us only the words the character say you
* talk talk talk. The dialogue is being used for narrative purposes – to tell us that the she's a dancer who's going on stage for important performance after months of reversal, that she has had a drinking problem in the past and he has some kind of caretaker role in her recovery from previous bouts of drunkenness. Attitude is being shown through the dialogue, too, by having the characters blurt out all their feelings – any case we don't get it, the author has words like soothingly and jokingly and snapped. The result? Melodrama. Were being forced to watch to complete strangers showing powerful emotions and talking about personal affairs that mean nothing to us. It would be embarrassing to watch real life, and it's embarrassing and offputting to read.
* But with penetration somewhere between light and deep, we get much more restrained, believable scene, the weekend of knowing the characters far better:
* Pete could tell Nora was nervous even before she sat down beside him – she was jittery and her smile disappeared almost instantly. She stared off into space for moment. Pete wondered if she was going over her routine again – she had done that a lot during the last few months, doing the steps and turns and kicks and leaps over and over in her mind, terrified that she forgotten something, makes a mistake and get lost to stand there looking like an idiot the way she did two years ago in Phoenix. No matter how many times Pete reassured her that it was alcohol that made her forget, she always answered by saying, all the dead brain cells are still dead. Hell, and she was right. Maybe her memory wasn't what it used to be. But she still had the moves, she still had the body, which got onstage the musicians muzzle pack up and go home, nobody would notice what they played, nobody would care, it was Nora in a pool of light on stage, doing things so daring and so dangerous and so sweet that you could prefer watching her.
* She reached out and put her hand around Pete street. He laid his hand gently on her arm.
* I just want to see what you were drinking, she said.
* W.
* He moved his hand. She shrugged in annoyance and pulled her arm away.
* Go ahead he pissed off at the, kid, but no ways alcohol going up on that stage with you to dance.
* In this version there are only two lines of spoken dialogue and nobody gets embarrassingly angry in public. Furthermore, if you know both Pete and Nora far better than before, because you seen Keith's memories of North struggled with alcohol filter through his own strong love for her – or at least for her dancing. We also know more about Nora's attitude toward herself; the dead brain cells line tells us that she thinks of herself as per melee damage, so that she is terrified of dancing again.
* The scene still isn't perfect, but it's a lot better now because we were able to get inside Pete's mind can see Nora through his eyes, with his attitude toward her, his knowledge of their shared past.
* If the second scene wasn't all deep penetration. Old Pete's memories were deep in hot, incident with the drink is cinematic and cool. We are told why Pete lays his hand gently on her arm – we already know about her drinking problem and we can guess. Nor do we need to be told that she's lying which he says I just wanted to see what you were drinking, or what he's feeling when he answers with a single word and refuses to movies my hand. We already know enough about the relationship that we supply our own heat for the scene. And yet we can drop back into deep penetration of the last paragraph, without even needing he thought tells were back inside Pete's head.
* Mastery of different levels of penetration is a vital part of bringing your character's life. This is where you have the most control over your readers experience, where you have the best chance to determine how well readers will know your characters and how much they'll care.