THE WRITER'S
EVERYTHING

Choosing Your
Viewpoint
Tense

From The Editor

QJ MARTIN

The more I study the writing craft and examine the practical applications of what I see, the more depth I feel that I have to offer in the contents of these articles.

This week's cover article never would have existed if it weren't for the week that I spent listening to indie novels. I thoroughly enjoyed the books that I received from lesser-known authors on Twitter. However, one book in particular fascinated me.

The reason for this is because of the tense that the author chose to write it in, and the way said choice transformed the story as a result. So, I hope you find this topic as interesting as I have.

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Until next time,

QJ

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Developing Your Character

Basic Information > Relationship Status

Does he have children?

Sometimes characters in relationships choose to actively attempt procreation. Some may end up having children with little to no effort, while for others, it may be extremely difficult to achieve pregnancy. At times, the arrival of a child is a complete surprise, and may require a major adjustment period. On the other hand, some expecting parents may tragically suffer the loss of their unborn child. In *Downton Abbey*, Mary Crawley and her husband Matthew conceive one child, George, who is born shortly before Matthew dies in a car crash. In *Daddy's Home*, Sara has two children with her ex-husband, Dusty Mayron, yet her current husband Brad Whitaker is unable to conceive with her. In *Up*, Carl and his wife Ellie try for years to have children before being informed by a doctor that it will never be possible.

Has he been in failed relationships before?

- IF SO, WHAT WENT WRONG?

Not every relationship ends up being a happily-ever-after. In fact, roughly half of all marriages end in divorce, and that doesn't even take into consideration the number of relationships that are ended while the couple is either dating or engaged. In *Daddy's Home*, the story revolves around Brad and Sara Whitaker as her ex-husband Dusty Mayron, who is also the father of her children, intrudes upon their relationship.

How do they feel about each other now?

Failed relationships often elicit strong negative emotions from both individuals. However, there are times when one of the two may miss the other, perhaps even hoping to be able to reunite with them. On other occasions, both may lament separating, but be unable to reconnect due to circumstances. In *Ant-Man*, Scott Lang's former wife, Maggie, has quite strong negative feelings for her ex-husband. She also believes that he is not a good father for their daughter, and should not be allowed to see her. In *Jurassic World*, Owen Grady regrets the fact that he is no longer in a relationship with the operations manager of Jurassic World, Claire Dearing. She, on the other hand, is still happy with her decision to end the relationship.

Basic Information > Daily Life

What activities does his daily life consist of?

A character's daily life is often shown at the outset of the story. This may be to demonstrate how mundane it is in comparison with his upcoming adventure. It can also be shown in the middle of the story, when the character has had a small taste of adventure and realizes his old life isn't enough anymore. A character's daily life may even be the focus of the story, especially in the case of dramas, comedies, and romances. In *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, we see an entire morning in the life of Arthur Dent before the earth is destroyed and he is whisked away. In *The Lord of the Rings*, Frodo returns to his home at the end of the story only to realize that he no longer fits in there.

Choosing Your Viewpoint Tense

QJ MARTIN

Many authors, myself included, have at one point or another rather foolishly believed that being able to come up with an idea for an awesome story was what made us good writers.

However, if you've reached the point in your career where you feel the need to seek out information such as the type found in this magazine, then you already know, rather tragically, that this is not the case.

The truth of the matter is that there are countless choices above and beyond plot that will unreservedly shape the final product that is your novel, for better or for worse.

Imagine, for example, that you want to write about a pirate who mutinies while the captain is away, then goes on to pull off the biggest heist on the seven seas, eventually even bringing his old commander under his rule in a thrilling third act. Sounds pretty straightforward, right?

So when does this story take place? The 1700s? The 1800s? The 1900s? Will it look like *Pirates of the Caribbean*, or will it look like *Captain Phillips*? Maybe it will even look like *Treasure Planet* or *Firefly*, minus the "seven seas" part.

Is the main character a man or a woman? Will they have to overcome gender inequality in order to gain the respect of the crew? Is she young or old? Does she have to prove her merit in order to wrest control from the captain, or does the entire crew already believe that she'd be the best person for the job?

Even more important than these large details, however, are the nuts-and-bolts questions, such as: What viewpoint is your story told from, and what tense will it be presented in?

Until very recently, I believed that it really didn't matter what tense my story was written in, or whose viewpoint it was told from.

I had a preference of course, as most people do. My preference for what I like to call the "Viewpoint Tense" is third person limited past tense.

Writing in past tense just feels easy to me. It allows me to focus on the story instead of how I present it. Writing in third person means that I don't need to develop a distinct voice in order to begin writing. It's all in the voice of the narrator, or rather, in *my own* voice.

A few weeks ago, however, I decided to read (in other words: listen) to a number of indie novels by relatively unknown authors I had found on Twitter and Facebook.

Several of these novels completely surprised me. In what way? The viewpoint tense that the authors had chosen to write in were completely different from what I would have expected given their genres.

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Writing Definitions

Dynamic Character

Dynamic characters are characters that experience consistent change, activity, or progress throughout the story. Dynamic characters are transformed by the events of the story, and are usually significantly different by the climax.

Static Character

Static characters are characters that experience little to no change over the course of the story. They don't grow or develop as individuals, and by the end of the story, they are basically identical to the characters they were in the beginning.

Round Character

Round characters are characters that experience conflict over the course of the story and are changed by it. They are round in the sense that they are three-dimensional, as opposed to flat characters that have no depth to them.

Flat Character

Flat characters are characters that are simplistic and uncomplicated. They're two-dimensional, meaning that they have little to no depth beyond what you see on the surface. They also tend not to change over the course of the story.

But they weren't just different for difference's sake. The story-telling choices the writers had made allowed their novels to unfold in unique manners that added originality to their presentation.

So I believe that the questions we should all be asking ourselves when we begin to write a new novel is: Which viewpoint tense (VPT) is going to be the best choice for our story, and how will the VPT affect the quality of the work itself?

Let's start by taking a look at the points of view, or perspectives, that we can choose to write from, and then we'll consider the three main tenses a story can be told in. Once we have these details established, we should have a much better idea of what we can do to bring it all together in the development of our story.

Point of View

Point of view, abbreviated as POV and also referred to as perspective, refers to who the narrator is in your story. To better illustrate this question, imagine that your narrator is a camera strategically placed to capture the events of your scene.

The camera could be placed on the ceiling, showing you the full picture without ever zooming in close enough to see specific, close-up details relating to each individual.

That same camera could be pointed to focus on one character, while at times rotating to show you a detail that the character cannot see or is oblivious to.

The camera could be placed directly behind the character, the way video games like *Uncharted*,

Halo, and *Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order* do. In this case, the focus would always be on the one individual, and any pertinent information about them would be brought directly to the reader's attention. The camera might not, however, be brought in close enough to see the minutia of the actions of other characters.

The camera could be placed within the character's own eyes, so that what they see, and what they think about what they see, is the only thing expressed to us as the readers.

Or there could be multiple cameras allowing the author to provide the reader with a variety of interesting combinations of perspectives. Some stories could switch back and forth often, even within a single chapter, while other stories may only cut away for just a moment to reveal a key piece of relevant information to the reader.

Every potential perspective, no matter how unique or crazy you attempt to make it, has already been experimented with. More than that, chances are high that it also has its own recognized name in the writing community. To start off with, however, it would be beneficial to know the names of the primary perspectives.

FIRST PERSON

First person is the perspective demonstrated by placing the camera behind the character's eye.

"I run for my life, my heart pounding," would be one example of first person. "I ran for my life. My heart was pounding," is another example.

An essential difference between this and what is known as limited third person, which we'll talk about later, is that first person is also tied directly into the mind of the character relating the story.

In other words, a story in first person is being told by someone who experienced or is experiencing the events firsthand. A first person narrator will always have a role in the plot of the story, although they will not always be the focus, or the main character, of the story.

SECOND PERSON

Second person is a rare perspective that could best be illustrated by looking in the mirror.

"You run for your life, your heart pounding," is an example of second person.

If you're a beginning novelist, I feel fairly confident in recommending that you don't worry about second person too much. The best examples of second person might be Choose Your Own Adventure stories where you, as the reader, are the main character, as well as a few similar video games.

It's always good to be aware of what the second person perspective is. You may not use it much now, but there's always a chance, however rare, that it can come into play in your writing down the line as your skills as an author progress.

THIRD PERSON

Third person encompasses all of the possible perspectives in which the camera is not directly tied to the mind of any of the characters.

"He ran for his life, his heart pounding," would be one example. "He ran for his life. Behind him, the spy silently slid another clip into her gun," is another. The first focuses on one

character, even describing the way he feels, but it doesn't read his mind. The second is told from an omniscient perspective, where the author can switch between characters at will, sharing whatever details are relevant to the plot.

Third person is by far the most common and the most versatile POV that you can use in your writing. For centuries, it was *the* point-of-view for any and every story-teller. Over the last few decades, however, it has quickly become little more than the security blanket in which the less adventurous authors find the most comfort.

Many authors still appreciate the ability that third person offers to build a story that is not attached to any one individual, to have events occur about which the main character is unaware. However, more and more authors, such as those in the YA genre, are growing to dislike third person because of the lack of intimacy it holds with the primary character.

Tense

Tense refers to the time in which the story takes place in relation to the telling of it. The primary difference that you'll see when you choose a tense is what verb forms you'll use in dialogue and narration.

There are three primary tenses, with two of them accounting for the majority of all novels. I'm going to try to summarize what they are without going too deep into variations. Believe it or not, English was not my favorite subject.

PAST TENSE

When you write in past tense, you write as if the events have already happened.

Writing Concepts

Character Wants vs. Character Needs

When it comes to character development, there are two different quantities that will affect every aspect of your story. They are character wants and character needs.

Character wants are the objects of the character's desire in the beginning of the story. Their wants are more often than not what drive their actions through a great deal of the plot, oftentimes all the way to the climax.

Character needs, on the other hand, are the things that will actually bring true happiness, meaning, and contentment to the life of the character.

Over the course of a character arc, the character comes to realize that their wants are not going to give them the satisfaction that they once imagined they would. Instead, they begin to identify the things they actually need in order to have a fulfilling life, and begin to shift their efforts towards obtaining these needs.

In some cases, they may realize that their wants are selfish and self-centered, that they are not compatible with their needs. In other cases, they realize that their needs are simply more important and should come first in their list of priorities.

Stories written in past tense are represented as the author, or one of the characters, recounting the events of previous adventures.

"He ran for his life. His heart was pounding," is an example of past tense. Notice the word "ran", as well as "was", which both indicate that the event has happened prior to the narration.

PRESENT TENSE

When you write in present tense, you write as if you're relating events in real time.

Present tense has the feel of a sports announcer on a live radio feed, detailing every event right as it happens so the listener feels like they're in the middle of the action.

"I run for my life, my heart pounding," is an example of present tense. Notice the word "run", as well as the word "pounding", which both indicate that the event is happening at this very moment in time.

FUTURE TENSE

When you write in future tense, you write as if the events being described are going to happen at a later point in time.

Fortune cookies and horoscopes are good examples of this tense, but you'll be hard pressed to find many novels written in future tense. Even Choose Your Own Adventure stories are generally in present tense.

Choosing Your Writing Tense

So how should you choose your viewpoint tense? Well, unsurprisingly, the basic answer is this: it depends fully on what your writing.

Different stories will warrant different points-of-view and writing tenses.

Modern YA fiction is often written in first-person present tense. That means that you're seeing events as they happen through the eyes and the interpretation of the main character.

Fantasy epics, on the other hand, are often written in third-person past tense. The camera is pulled back to be slightly less personal because of the huge cast of characters that are being presented. The story is told in past tense as if it's a recounting of history, and with the level of detail and backstory that the author develops, that's often exactly what it feels like.

But there's another way to determine what the best viewpoint tense for our story will be. Ask yourself: How does my choice of VPT affect the story that I am choosing to tell?

What if you write a fantasy epic in first-person present tense? Each character presented speaks in their own words, and you hear the story from their own mind. Rather than having the consistent voice of the narrator throughout, you would be presented with different voices offering different perspectives and different interpretations about what the world is like.

What if you write a YA fiction novel in third-person omniscient? Picture hearing not just the thoughts and insights of the main character, but the those of their parents, friends, and maybe even their antagonist. Imagine what your story would be like if you already know the truths that your character is searching for so desperately.

On the other hand, imagine if a novel such as *Dune* was written in first-person present tense.

Would it still have the same scope and significance if you were unaware of the lies and schemes of everyone around the MC?

Would any of the early *Harry Potter* books have been as interesting and engaging if they were written in an omniscient point-of-view, wherein every third or fourth chapter shows you exactly what the newest teacher of the Dark Arts is doing throughout the story?

Viewpoint tense is often a mandatory choice for many authors, but it can really have a great effect on the presentation of a novel, and even on the plot itself.

Taking Time To Cultivate Stories

QJ MARTIN

Is there any greater tragedy in the world of 21st century network television than the cancellation of Josh Whedon's sci-fi masterpiece, *Firefly*?

This entertaining and fascinating space western could have easily been one of the top franchises of the decade if Fox had chosen to handle the show with competence and care. Unfortunately, competence isn't always in Fox's MO.

Identifying Theme

The 2006 thriller film titled *The Prestige* by Christopher Nolan is one of my all-time favorite movies by this famed director, and the one to which I often hold his other works in comparison. While the theme of the movie may not be entirely optimistic, it's still very clearly represented in the actions of the two main magicians.

The question that is analyzed in the lives of both Robert Angier and Alfred Borden is: "What extent is an artist willing to go to for the sake of his craft?"

While the story begins with a back and forth argument between the two characters about whether sacrificing your life, health,

The Prestige

and joy for the sake of your art is extreme or if it is reasonable, the story quickly deviates from this debate.

We soon find both characters working tirelessly to outdo each other in an endless and deadly game of one-uppance.

It isn't until the climax of the story, when both characters have taken their actions to their inevitable and tragic conclusion, that we see a reversing of ideologies. Robert fully embraces the dedication that lead to the death of his wife, and, on numerous occasions, himself, while Alfred comes to understand his show was never worth the loss of his brother, nor that of his wife.

But let's not get me started on Fox's track record for sci-fi television shows. (I'm looking at you, *Almost Human*, *Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles*, *Gifted*...) And let's not dwell overly much on how awesome of a career Nathan Fillion could have had over the last twenty years if *Firefly* had been a success, and how many wonderful action films of his are currently not lining my shelf due to a lack of existence. (I'm clearly working through a lot of feelings right now, so let's move on.)

If there's anything that writers can learn from the cancelation of *Firefly*, it comes in the form of its follow-up film, *Serenity*.

The existence of *Serenity* is in itself a wonder. Thousands of fan letters moved Fox to actually spend the money to make a feature-length sequel to *Firefly* in order to tie up loose ends.

The problem, however, comes in its brevity. Josh Whedon quite obviously had a great deal planned for his show moving forward. In spite of the episodic nature of *Firefly*, it had managed to build up a great deal of backstory, including the mystery of Simon and his sister River, over the course of fourteen episodes.

So, of course, when he was forced to tie up all the overarching plot threads of his planned series in one two-hour film release, the result was more than a little disappointing.

Serenity in itself was not a bad film. It was very well-reviewed, and has since earned its place on many different lists of top sci-fi films. However, it goes without saying that fans of the show realized how much potential *Firefly* had, and *Serenity* simply could not live up to it.

Why is that? The reason as I see it is that Josh Whedon had to condense what I'm willing to bet was at the very least three seasons' worth of twists, turns, and reveals into a single movie.

Suddenly, within the course of 119 minutes, everything that we had come to believe was turned upside down. The Reavers were no longer adventurous spaceship crews who went mad staring into the nothingness of empty space. Rather, they were the unfortunate side-effect of an experimental drug administered planet-wide with the goal of ending aggression. The characters that we had expected to go on adventures with for years to come were killed in the blink of an eye.

What should we learn from these abrupt and jarring changes to the *Firefly* universe? I believe that the answer is that there is a minimum amount of time required to cultivate a story.

The changes that *Serenity* brought to the lore of the *Firefly* universe, especially in regard to the Reavers, for example, would not have been shocking if they had been developed over the course of several seasons.

As authors, we need to make sure that we take as much time as needed to develop our stories. Each story is going to be different, of course, but each story will require a certain amount of building for the reveals to have the needed weight to truly impact our audiences.

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How long does it usually take you to cultivate a story? Let me know on Twitter at twitter.com/qj_author.