

Point of View: The Unappreciated Discipline

by Linda Rohrbough

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If you spend time in a writer's critique group, you'll hear some feedback about point of view (POV). Competent handling of POV makes a story work. Incompetent handling can make a story un-sellable. A lot of problems I see in manuscripts boil down to POV. Hence I call it the underappreciated discipline.

First, let's define POV as the eyes through which the story is told. POV is also the crux, the basis for the story, and it determines every detail. If you read this article as a story, the point of view is mine. You only see and hear what I know and experience.

Forgive me if this is too elemental, but I also notice sometimes writers get POV confused with what person the story is told in. This article is in first person because I use the term "I" and "me." I could use second person (you) or third person (they or someone's name like Linda). I can tell the story from my viewpoint in either first person or third person. The person the story is in doesn't determine POV unless I use first person, in which case the story has to be in the viewpoint of the person talking.

So what makes POV so powerful? Frankly, it determines everything. Let's say I have a story where a young woman goes to the bridal store, picks up her wedding dress, tries it on one last time and the dress is too small. The story is going to be different from the bride's viewpoint than from the mother's, the father's, or even the shop owner's. The head I choose to be in is determined by what I want to do with the story. In this example, it could be really interesting to have a cynical shop owner tell the story. She could say

things in her head like she just lost ten percent profit margin when all ten pearl buttons popped off.

Now that we’ve defined POV, let’s talk about some common POV errors. I’ll present a set of do’s and don’ts and describing the symptoms when POV is violated.

1. Avoid describing things the POV character couldn’t possibly know.

“Sylvia looked at Fred. Fred was upset.” How does Sylvia know Fred is upset? This is the old “show don’t tell,” advice, which in my opinion, is a POV problem. Instead have Sylvia notice Fred’s behavior and let the reader conclude Fred is upset. She could notice he chewed his lip, or his face turned red and he hit the counter with his fist. Observation of action or body language by our viewpoint character is much more interesting and makes the work stronger.

2. Avoid “head hopping.” This is the writer’s “street” term for rapid POV shifts that are unannounced and distracting. First we see the world from one character’s viewpoint. The next sentence or paragraph we’re suddenly jerked into an omniscient viewpoint or into someone else’s head. Readers ask, “What?” and scratch their heads trying to figure out who is talking or where they are in the story. The only working exception to this rule is in sex scenes, mostly in romance novels; and it only works if the writer is clear whose head we’re in when feelings or thoughts are being described.

3. Look at POV if descriptions don’t work. If you find yourself uncomfortable with a description or your critique partners complain your character wouldn’t say or do that, you’ve got a POV problem. You’re either not far enough in the character’s viewpoint to recognize what they’d say to describe something, or you don’t understand

enough of their backstory to know who they are. Either way, you’ve got a POV problem to correct.

4. Experiment with various POV’s. One mistake new writers make is not trying different points of view. A change is especially powerful if you have a story or a scene that isn’t working. You’ll learn about your story even if you abandon the POV change. And it can usually be done in your head, although some writers do it on paper.

In our bridal dress example, the ten pearl buttons popping off could be viewed by the father of the bride as something he’ll make sure the shop owner corrects without extra charges. And he could be looking for evidence the dress was swapped for a different size to please another customer.

If we get into the head of the mother of the bride, she thinks back to last week’s meals wondering if she used light sour cream in the stroganoff or should have served salad instead of macaroni and cheese. So she watches her daughter’s figure for telltale clues of extra pounds.

You see how shifting POV changes the story even if it’s the same events, told in the same person. Done correctly, readers learn a lot about the POV character without being “told.” TV shows sometimes play with POV by doing an episode where we see the same event through the eyes of several different people. Regular people quickly get bored by this, because they want the story to go someplace. But writers are endlessly fascinated by shifting viewpoints and love the arts-y-ness of a production that explores this discipline.

So if you find yourself with a lagging story or one with description you know doesn't work, take a look at point of view. Shift things around a bit and look at the events through another set of eyes. You'll be glad you did.

Biography: *Linda Rohrbough has been writing professionally since 1989, has more than 5,000 articles and seven books to her credit. She's received awards in both fiction and non-fiction, including three national awards. Her book Weight Loss Surgery with the Adjustable Gastric Band , co-authored with Robert Sewell, M.D. was published by Da Capo Lifelong books in March 2008. Visit her website: www.LindaRohrbough.com.*