

WRITING DEEP VIEWPOINT: Invite Your Readers Into the Story

Chapter 1 Viewpoint, the Keystone

What does a reader want—at the deepest level—when she curls up with a good book?

Let's set aside the student who needs to write a report for a class, the traveler who needs information, or the cook looking for new recipes. I mean *readers* like us, who stand in a bookstore or subscribe to a book review service or browse a website, searching for just the right novel. What are we looking for?

I have a theory.

People who read fiction want to feel like they've been somewhere else, to experience an episode of life as if they had been someone else, maybe someplace where it's impossible, impractical or even dangerous to go—but they want to spend time in a situation that grabs and holds their interest. They want to know, "What would it be like to be the person in that story?" They want to explore the human experience, to come away enriched and enlivened.

It's possible to get a similar experience watching TV or a film. With enticing visuals, skillful acting, and moving background music, filmed stories can take us to other places and times, even places that don't exist and times that have never been.

But written fiction is different.

When I sit in my comfy chair, reading—either on paper or electronically—I forget that I'm staring at squiggles on a flat surface that other English speakers have combined into units of meaning called "words." In my mind, as I sit in that chair I *become* Frodo leaving the Shire, or Lucy mourning over the murdered Aslan, or Hermione desperately waving her hand to be called on in class.

Those of us who write short stories, novellas, poems, or novels have an advantage over the people who write for film: unassisted by the staff of hundreds in a typical movie-ending scroll, our readers—all alone—can feel as if they have actually *become* the characters they read about. An absorbed reader forgets that she's on an internal journey.

It doesn't always happen, though.

Some story lines don't convince a thoughtful reader. Some fictional characters just don't appeal to everyone. As writers, we understand that. We read, too. We have preferences. Still, we want to create books that make the full-immersion reading experience easy to enter.

Think about how that happens. What does fiction writing entail?

Well, it's an art, a craft, a business, and sometimes a ministry. It's an *art* because spinning an interesting tale takes inspired creativity. Inventing characters that readers love and believe in is also an art. Art also often means striking a balance between following a writing "rule" and ignoring it to make a scene more effective.

That's because writing is also a *craft*. While *art* comes straight from the writer's heart (it develops over a lifetime of reading, as well as observing and handling real-life troubles), anyone who practices a *craft* must learn to use its tools. After all, similar pointed objects might be wielded by sculptors or carpenters. Writers' tools involve word choices instead of chisels and screwdrivers, and the quality of the stories we build will depend on how well we learn the craft.

This book is about a cluster of tools that wordsmiths use to create compelling stories. It's a book of advice, not unbreakable rules but ways that you can utilize those writing tools. Its central concept, *deep viewpoint*, is a way to make your readers feel that they have entered into your story and are living there. That's the experience I believe readers want.

Our writing goal is to *communicate story ... and truth ...* so that it leaves a writer's mind to live in someone else's. Have you noticed that the most absorbing part of a sermon or lecture often comes when the speaker pauses the exposition to illustrate that truth with a story?

Strong fiction shows real human nature and the consequences of conflicts or mistakes. A speech or an exegetical sermon can *tell* me about a truth, but a story can make me feel as if I've been the character who made those choices, went to those places, interacted with those other characters and experienced the aftermath.

Picture this: When a reader opens a book, she stands in front of an archway that leads into a story. Whether she'll enter, and whether she'll stay inside to the end, often depends on the author's skill. That arch is built of storytelling techniques, including smoothly written dialogue, believable settings, and intriguing characters in convincing conflict. Like the keystone at the top of an arch, *viewpoint* holds all the other skills in place. They support viewpoint, and it anchors them all together.

Our readers want to enter our stories and experience our characters' lives. Part of our job is learning to help them to do that—learning how to invite them in. Distracting them can kick them right out of the story, and there are so many potential distractors. Spelling or punctuation errors. Poor proofreading. Bad logic. Unbelievable characters. Confusion. Sooner or later, a reader who's confused will put the book down.

We compete for our readers' time with everything from "What's in the refrigerator?" to "What's new online?" We need to bring them and hold them *inside the story*. To borrow a phrase from fantasy writers, we need to cast a spell, convincing our readers that they have become these characters. We have to avoid anything that would let them off the hook—that would break the spell—that would encourage them to walk back out through the arch.

Viewpoint—also called point of view or POV—is linked to nearly everything that a fiction writer accomplishes. It's that vital. I mean to explain how viewpoint works, to show you how it works, and to show you how it looks when it isn't working.

Especially *deep viewpoint*.

Where the Action Really Takes Place

When I watch a story on a screen, the action happens on that screen. It's deeply absorbing, especially when there's great acting, strong editing, fantastic cinematography, and moving background music. I love a John Williams soundtrack.

But the real action of a written story takes place *in the reader's mind*.

That's why well-crafted writing is powerful. That's why it's vital for a writer to help a reader understand, "Who am I in this scene?" without distraction or confusion. Deep viewpoint helps the reader feel that she has *become* the character. We are mainlining *story* directly into their bloodstream. Nothing, but nothing, comes between a deeply absorbed reader and that story.

Sometimes, the reading experience can feel shallow or even "outside" the character's heart and mind. Here's an example of shallow viewpoint:

John stood with two other men beside the unfinished house.

Sometimes, the author allows the reader a little deeper:

John leaned against the unfinished wall and stared at his partners.

And sometimes, the author invites the reader deep into the experience of *being* that character.

John leaned against a two-by-four and waited for an answer.

Each one of those three examples takes viewpoint deeper, and I hope to show you how to apply that difference to your fiction.

First, let me admit that after writing and editing fiction for 30-plus years, I've developed a strong viewpoint preference. Other authors have used viewpoints other than my favorite—deep, third person limited—to craft excellent novels. In Chapter 2, I'll explain some of the other valid viewpoints that fiction writers use, but I'll also try to convince you to try writing in *deep* but *limited* third-person viewpoint. It's the easiest viewpoint to write well, so it's the one I enjoy teaching. From a solid understanding of deep, third-person limited POV you can go on to try other points of view. It's like learning to play the piano well enough to read music before you take up another musical instrument.

Or like me, you might decide third-person limited works so well that you just keep using it.

Let me explain the different viewpoints. Let me take Chapter 2 to tell you about them. Then follow me through the other chapters, and I'll show you how to use deep viewpoint to invite readers into your story.