

Writing in the First Person

Writing in the first person doesn't have to be limited to present tense. If you are writing as the character, you can decide if the character is discovering the world, plot, other characters' intentions in 'real time', or whether they are retelling a story once it has happened (past tense).

There are some points you will need to be wary of as you write, however.

Main point 1	<p>The character's attitude drives the style</p> <p>When the character is telling the story, you must remember that the narrative should follow their attitude.</p>
Image idea	<p>A person 'holding court' – either at a bar talking while others listen, or on a chair talking while others sit on the floor listening like at school</p>
Sub-point 1	<p>Bad example: "I order my drink and watch the bartender pour it. He seems slightly mad."</p> <p>Good example: "The clock behind the bar says it's almost closing time. I order anyway, and smirk as the bartender serves me with as much mirth as a funeral director. If he didn't want to stay this late, he should close sooner."</p> <p>Analysis: The bad example gives very little information about the narrator. If the readers are to learn about the world in which the narrator resides, or the personality of them as a character, elaboration is key. The good example shows you the sarcasm and general attitude of the narrator.</p>
Sub-point 2	<p>Bad example: "I watched the bartender pour my drink politely with a smile."</p> <p>Good example: "The bartender rolls his eyes with a grin as he pours my order. My apologetic voice and sweet smile always work."</p> <p>Analysis: The good example shows the reader that the narrator can manipulate situations to their advantage, something that is useful to know throughout the story.</p>
Sub-point 3	<p>Bad example: "I stood waiting for someone to give up their seat. They didn't."</p> <p>Good example: "Holding the small of my back, I stared at the passengers. Not one of them would look at me. It's not as if being heavily pregnant is obscene, but apparently being gallant enough to let me sit is."</p> <p>Analysis: The good example gives you more information not only about the narrator's mood, but also the reason for it. It helps readers empathise.</p>
Notes	
Main point 2	<p>You only know what your narrator knows.</p>

	Unlike an omniscient narrator, the first-person narrator is only privy to information that they have been told by another character or what they have seen themselves. Unknown variables will stay that way until the narrator discovers them in the story
Image idea	A character standing looking at a big box with a question mark on it
Sub-point 1	<p>Bad example: “Cherie answers her telephone and only hears breathing, with a panic she slams the receiver down and calls me.”</p> <p>Good example: ““There was only breathing,” Cherie tells me, her voice fast and ragged. “I didn’t know who else to call... It was terrifying.””</p> <p>Analysis: The bad example slips into omniscient narration. Without the narrator being informed, they know exactly how the character reacted and felt. The good example provides the same picture but as a conversation with small descriptions that convey distress.</p>
Sub-point 2	Didn’t feel further sub points to this were needed. Let me know if you would like me to add further examples
Sub-point 3	Didn’t feel further sub points to this were needed. Let me know if you would like me to add further examples
Main point 3	Things to Avoid
Image idea	Stop sign
Sub-point 1	<p>Remember your narrator is a character</p> <p>Unless this is a memoir, the narrator is not you. Take a step back from your own voice, and think like the character, like acting in a play.</p>
Sub-point 2	<p>Avoid too many filter words.</p> <p>Writing “I watched the parade go by” leans towards telling, not showing. It removes the reader from the scene. Instead, invoke the atmosphere your narrator is experiencing by rewriting as “the parade gambolled past, full of celebration.”</p>
Sub-point 3	<p>Don’t stay in the character’s head too long.</p> <p>It is easy to get lost in inner monologues with a First Person narrator, however, as with any narration, a book must have action to move forward.</p> <p>Private Investigators get a client</p> <p>A shop assistant has to deal with a difficult customer</p> <p>A driver gets in an argument over a parking space</p> <p>All these bring new characters into the story, along with dialogue, it provides action and interest for the reader</p>
Sub-point 4	<p>Remember which tense you are working in</p> <p>If you are used to writing in past tense, or just new to writing in the first person, it can be easy to slip between tenses.</p>

	<p>Make sure you set out early on whether this is a ‘real-time’ story, or a story your narrator is retelling.</p> <p>After each section of your story, recheck the narrative a tweak where required.</p>
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