

Novel Writing 101: the first draft

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Section: A **Week:** 2 **Topic:** Key Story Decisions / Finding Inspiration

Key Story Decisions Worksheet

Before you dive deeper into your story, it's important to understand a few key logistics of novel writing and how your narrative might be impacted. Though it's easy to get swept up into your ideas and want to immediately jump into the writing process, the more prepared you are before you begin, the better your first draft will be.

In the following pages, you'll be asked to address the following things when it comes to your story:

- POV
- Tense
- Length
- Duration
- Audience

POV: point of view | who is telling this story?

POV (point of view) is the perspective from which you're telling the story. This is your narrative voice. It is the lens from which readers will view the story and begin to judge characters. Your POV will have a massive impact on how your story is told. For instance, a first person, single POV might lead you to write an unreliable narrator who constantly feeds the reader lies until a major plot twist reveals their deception. On the other hand, a multiple POV in third person omniscient may be the best way to tell a story that traverses many people's experiences going through a singular event simultaneously.

Another way to think about POV is as the keeper of the story. For instance, a first person POV requires that the character play an active role, whereas third person narration can take on an unbiased, overarching perspective. Ask yourself questions about who would best tell this story. Is it a survivor of the event? Is it someone living this romance in real time? Or is it an all-knowing, godlike voice giving us a play-by-play? It's important to think about who your narrator will be early on so you can make informed decisions before you begin writing that first page.

As you begin to think about how different POVs could drive your story forward, remember that the only right answer is the one you feel strongly about. Nothing is worse than finishing your first draft and realizing the entire thing would be more impactful in a different POV or that you hate how a certain POV sounds.

The most common POVs:

- First person
- Second person
- Third person limited
- Third person omniscient

First person:

You are writing from the perspective of the narrator experiencing these things for themselves; utilizes “I” statements.

Example:

The road is full of potholes, and it takes all of my focus to avoid them as I run. My breath heaves in my lungs as the sun bears down on me with unforgiving heat. I don't know much how longer I can go on, but I know I can't stop.

Second person:

You are writing from the perspective of the reader; utilizes “you” statements.

Example:

The road is full of potholes, and it takes all of your focus to avoid them as you run. Your breath heaves in your lungs as the sun bears down on you with unforgiving heat. You don't know much how longer you can go on, but you know you can't stop.

Third person limited:

You are writing from the perspective of a narrator observing characters; utilizes “he”, “she”, “they” statements; the narrator only knows the thoughts and feelings of one character at a time.

Example:

She watches Jonas with unwavering focus. It makes her nervous how his hands twitch at his sides, but he doesn't make any move to lunge for her. With that bored smile on his face, he looks like he could care less. I just need to get back to the others, Jenna thinks. She clenches the knife, her knuckles white under tension, and takes a step back.

Third person omniscient:

You are writing from the perspective of a narrator observing characters; utilizes “he”, “she”, “they” statements; the narrator is all-knowing and perceives all characters with a singular voice.

Example:

Jenna watches Jonas with unwavering focus. It makes her nervous how his hands twitch at his sides, but he doesn't make any move to lunge for her. Jonas's lips pull back into a bored smile. He wants to tear Jenna limb from limb, but he won't until the time is right. Jenna clenches the knife, her knuckles white under tension, and takes a step back. Jonas finds it amusing, but his patience only goes so far.

A Note on Head Hopping:

One common pitfall of third person limited narration is the slippery slope of "head hopping". This is where the narrator switches the perspective from character to character, utilizing their specific voices and thoughts, often within the same paragraph. This mistake is jarring and pulls the reader out of the story due to the narration feeling misplaced and disjointed. Instead of constraining perspective switches to designated moments (ie: new chapters), this utilizes the constant jump in and out of different character's heads. As opposed to third person omniscient (where the narrator has a "godlike" perspective and a consistent voice), this makes the reader feel like they're experiencing the story from deep in one specific character's perspective on minute, then bouncing to another in the next. Head hopping can be confusing, but a good signifier is jumping around to different character's inner monologues while in third person limited (when you're supposed to be focused on only one).

Example:

She watches Jonas with unwavering focus, studying every flash of emotion across the boy's face. It makes her nervous how his hands twitch at his sides, but he doesn't make any move to lunge for her. What a sucker, Jonas muses to himself, brimming with sick delight. With that bored smile on his face, he looks like he could care less. I just need to get back to the others, Jenna thinks. She clenches the knife, her knuckles white under tension, and takes a step back.

POV and Genre:

If you pick up a few traditionally published novels at the bookstore and compare them, you might find that there is often a common theme between books in the same genre when it comes to POV. For example, you'll find that a vast majority of Thrillers are written in third person. Third person can work really well for thrillers and crime novels because the sense of shadowing characters builds mystery and allows you to uncovering clues at the same time. But couldn't the same thing be argued for first person? Couldn't being deep in the head of one character and living the story through their perspective help blind the reader to certain clues while dramatically revealing others? Yes! Just because a lot of people pair one genre with a specific POV doesn't mean you have to do it that way, too. Like every decision in the writing process, your choices should be dictated by your preference, taste, and creativity—not trends and industry expectations. Remember, the objective isn't to write the best-selling novel on the market (or at least, I hope that isn't your goal). It should be to write a story you're passionate about telling.

Determining how many characters get POVs:

The last decision to make when it comes to point of view is how many characters get their time to shine. It's common to keep the reader with the same character throughout the entire story, but multiple POVs can introduce new information, move subplots along, and have a significant impact on the main storyline.

Think about how different perspectives could impact the story you're writing. Will the narrative be best told through your main character's perspective and none others? Or does your story contain a large cast and would benefit from multiple perspectives?

Single POV:

This is where your book follows the perspective of the same character throughout the entirety of the book; this can be a crucial decision in things like third-person limited perspective, as you won't know what certain characters are thinking without giving them their own time to shine. However, single POV can be great way to conceal information from the reader.

Multiple POV:

This is where your story follows multiple characters throughout the book to get their perspective. To avoid head hopping, this typically utilizes chapter ends to change perspective. This can be great tool to use when characters split up or when the plot is affected by multiple people in different locations or facing different obstacles.

Examples:

Let's use the following premise example from Week 1 to determine whether singular or multiple POV would be most beneficial.

A woman finds herself in the middle of a global invasion with nothing but the clothes on her back and an unwelcome alliance with someone she swore to forget.

Single POV: if you stick with the woman's perspective for the entirety of the book, you can keep the focus on her character development as she faces this global invasion and the unwelcome alliance with someone from her past. You can dig deep into her own personal trauma, feelings, and motives, while keeping the other character secondary and supportive to her journey.

Multiple POV: if you start with the woman's perspective, you can drop the reader into the danger she faces on the first day of the invasion. Then, to introduce another perspective of the same event, you can jump to the perspective of the person she'll soon be forced to strike an alliance with. This second character becomes a more prominent part of the story, spotlighted with their own thoughts, feelings, and motivations. Multiple POVs can be great for stories where the POV characters' fates or futures are tangled together. It gives the reader an inside look into both sides and allows them to speculate how the characters could clash or come together later in the book.

POV: point of view | who is telling this story?

Please use the below space to brainstorm how different POVs could impact your story:

(Using your premise statement as a starting point, explore how the narrative could best be told through different narrators. Don't forget to explore singular and multiple POV as well, and remember: the most important thing is that you're excited to write this specific POV.)

Tense: moment in time | when is this story occurring?

Another key thing to consider before jumping into the writing process is the tense. This is the moment in time in which this story is being experienced.

Past:

You are writing as if retelling a story that has already occurred.

Example:

Ginny took long, determined steps as she walked across the courtyard. An unsettling chorus of caws erupted in a warning chime, announcing each foolish step she took further toward the temple. She didn't sneak so much as a glance at the dark-feathered birds as she passed, though she felt their presence like an unwanted touch. Those beady, black eyes watched her from atop high stone walls, their cries penetrating the gloomy morning air. Ginny wrung her hands together and kept her head dipped low. Every member of Shadowgate knew it was unwise to meet a raven's gaze. It was akin to looking the heir directly in the eye, and no one wished to risk such notice.

Present:

You are writing as if living the story for the first time.

Example:

Ginny takes long, determined steps as she walks across the courtyard. An unsettling chorus of caws erupts in a warning chime, announcing each foolish step she takes further toward the temple. She doesn't sneak so much as a glance at the dark-feathered birds as she passes, though she feels their presence like an unwanted touch. Those beady, black eyes watch her from atop high stone walls, their cries penetrating the gloomy morning air. Ginny wrings her hands together and keeps her head dipped low. Every member of Shadowgate knows it's unwise to meet a raven's gaze. It's akin to looking the heir directly in the eye, and no one wishes to risk such notice.

Tense and Narration:

While it's important to keep your preferences in mind when deciding whether to write past or present tense, it's worth noting how your narrator relates to the story and how that might impact tense. A first person narration where the character is a survivor of a horrible accident could be told in either past or present tense—considering a survivor is inherently one who lives to tell a tale. However, each offers unique advantages. For example, present tense could help build the suspense and rely on high stakes and real-time action to move the story along. It might have the reader questioning if our main character does make it out alive. However, telling this same story in past tense offers an opportunity to not only guide the reader through the narrative, but surprise them with breaks in it. Breaks in the narrative—like fading back to the narrator in real time as they're telling this tale to someone else—allow you to compare life *then* versus life *now*. Has the main character suffered life-altering injuries? Has the world vastly changed from what it was when the original story was taking place? Did the main character learn from their mistakes? Dig deep into the possibilities of writing tense and brainstorm how it could impact your story.

Tense: moment in time | when is this story occurring?

Please use the below space to brainstorm how different tenses could impact your story:

(Using your premise statement as a starting point, utilize your previous thoughts on POV to explore how the story could best be told through different tenses. Don't forget to keep in mind whether or not your characters survive!)

Length: word count | how long will this story be?

Though not as interesting as some of our other decisions, length is something that should be top of mind when tackling your first draft. Though it's not necessary to know *exactly* how long your novel will be before you start writing it, it's good to have a ballpark range to shoot for. This is also the time to consider if you do want to write a full-length novel, or if your story idea and preferences are more suited to something else.

How long are different types of stories?

Flash fiction: under 1,000 words
Short story: between 1,000 - 10,000 words
Novelette: between 7,500 - 20,000 words
Novella: between 17,500 - 40,000 words
Novel: over 40,000 words

Average words per page in a novel: 200-300 words (depending on the book size, font, and margins)

As far as industry standards go, there are some baseline expectations when it comes to genre and length. If your goal is to query your novel and get agent representation (we'll cover this in future courses), then it's wise to keep the below numbers in mind. Though, if you're pursuing indie publishing and find yourself with more story to tell (*ahem cough cough*—like me), then use these genre expectations as a guideline, not a hard-and-fast rule.

Common genre expectations:

- Fantasy, Sci-fi, and Speculative: 90,000 – 120,000
- Horror and Thriller: 70,000 – 100,000
- Literary: 70,000 – 100,000
- Romance: 60,000 – 90,000

Length: word count | how long will this story be?

Please use the below space to take note of the general word count you're aiming for:

(Using the typical story lengths and genre expectations above, explore how length will impact your story.)

Duration: number of books | how many stories does it take to tell the full story?

Another crucial decision to make before you begin writing is to determine how many books it'll take to tell the full story. If your story takes place in the real world or covers a singular event that wraps up concisely, this can be an easy decision. Standalone novels are stories that start and finish within one singular book and give the readers a sense of completion. However, if you have a complex world, a plot with multiple storylines converging into one major event, or a serialized narrative (think detective series or medical dramas), then a series might be what you need to tell your story in the best way possible.

Standalone:

A singular book that contains a complete narrative and doesn't require other materials to be read before or after.

Series:

A collection of books that takes the reader through a connected narrative to arrive at a final outcome or event.

Pros + Cons: Standalone

+

Contains one complete narrative

-

Too much story can negatively affect the pacing

Ability to reach an immediate conclusion

Less time to tackle complex plots and worldbuilding

Pros + Cons: Series

+

Allows for more complex narratives and worldbuilding

-

Requires other materials to be read to gain a complete understanding

Can utilize multiple arcs instead of one

Can take longer to get to the point or grab a reader's attention

Duration: number of books | how many stories does it take to tell the full story?

Please use the below space to brainstorm how long it will take to tell your story:

(Think long and hard about how much story you have to tell, while exploring the pros and cons of standalones vs series.)

Audience: ideal reader | who is this story for?

The last key decision you must consider before you start writing is audience. It's important to determine who your story is for so you can cater not only your writing to your audience, but your content as well. Books on the market today are typically categorized by age range, taking into account things like content warnings, storytelling themes, and characters.

General Audiences:

Middle Grade: ages 8 – 12

YA (Young Adult): ages 12 – 18

New Adult: ages 18 – 25

Adult: ages 18+

Middle Grade: written for children between the ages of 8 – 12, with appropriately aged content and characters.

YA (Young Adult): written for teenagers 12 – 18 years old, featuring characters of the same age.

New Adult: written to fill a gap between YA and Adult, catering to college-aged readers with similarly aged characters and life milestones.

Adult: written for adults over 18 years old, often depicting content that is only appropriate for adults. (sex, violence, trauma, etc.)

Audience: ideal reader | who is this story for?

Please use the below space to brainstorm what kind of audience would be drawn to your story:

(Using your premise statement as a starting point, explore how the narrative caters to one of the audiences outlined above.)

Final Story Decisions: Committing To Your Story's Structure

Now that you've spent some time considering a few key logistics, it's time to make the final decisions for your novel. Remember to use your premise statement as a foundation and ask yourself how things like POV, tense, length, duration, and audience can impact your narrative.

Utilize the below to finalize these key decisions for your story. Though this might seem tedious, this will have a significant impact on your outline and dictate how you write when we get to Week 5.

POV: (circle one in each section)

First person Second person Third person limited Third person omniscient

Singular POV Multiple POV

Tense: (circle one)

Past Present

Length: (circle one)

Short story Novelette Novella Novel

(fill out the below information)

The length I'm aiming for my novel is between _____ and _____ words.

Duration: (circle one)

Standalone Series

Audience: (circle one)

Middle Grade Young Adult New Adult Adult