

# MOFFETT AND POINT OF VIEW: A CREATIVE WRITING ASSIGNMENT SEQUENCE

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Choosing an appropriate point of view of a work of fiction is one of the most fundamental and complex problems beginning creative writing students will face. Point of view, the perspective the narrator assumes in relation to the story and audience, is more complex than traditional categories (first person and third person limited, omniscient, and dramatic) may lead students to believe. To understand more fully the range and interrelationships of various point of view options, students need to approach them through some comprehensive, structured, sequenced framework. Such a framework exists in James Moffett's sequence of narrative types.

In *Teaching the Universe of Discourse*, Moffett offers the rhetorical triangle—first person (narrator), second person (audience), and third person (narrative)—as the “super-structure” of discourse (10). Moffett believes it possible to structure an English curriculum which leads the students' reading and writing through the various relationships of this triangle, relationships which become increasingly more abstract and disparate as the elements become separated further in time and space (25). Such a structured sequence allows students to learn “style, logic, semantics, rhetoric, and literary form continuously through practice. . .” (13). It also frees students from viewing the teacher as the sole audience for their writing, for from the first assignments they write for some other, specified audience. Moffett urges that students be trained in group work, encouraged to have their work read and discussed in workshops (12).

Of primary concern in *Teaching the Universe of Discourse* is what Moffett terms “chronologic discourse,” ways of recording what is happening (drama) and reporting what happened (narration) (35). Narration he divides into eleven stages which move “from the most subjective and personal to the most objective and impersonal, as regards both the speaker’s relation to his listener and the speaker’s relation to his subject” (122).

Moffett’s sequence of narrative types offers creative writing instructors and students several benefits when approaching point of view. First, the sequence presents an understandable progression in point of view based not on difficulty or quality, but on increased distance between the major components of story telling: the narrator, narrative, and audience. These elements become more diffused in time and space as the sequence progresses from the most subjective kinds of writing—where the narrator is an intimate of the action, closely linked to the events of the narrative, addressing a known and identifiable audience—to more objective writing—where the narrator is anonymous, distancing himself from the events of the story until he merely presents scene and action as a spectator himself.

The following assignment sequence, based on Moffett’s work, can help students learn in a structured way the various points of view most often used by authors. Underlying all the assignments are several assumptions: (1) point of view concerns how a reader views a story since the author always remains omniscient, (2) point of view can affect a reader’s cognitive and emotional responses to a story, and (3) point of view is an aspect of story telling the author is free to manipulate in attempts to alter a reader’s response for rhetorical or aesthetical reasons.<sup>1</sup> A clear distinction is being drawn between the author of a story and the narrator he or she creates.

(1) **INTERIOR MONOLOGUE.** The first assignment in the sequence involves intrapersonal communication where the speaker and listener are one. Students are asked to write a piece where they imitate the narrator’s thought patterns. To illustrate this point of view, instructors might have students read sections from the opening of *The Sound and the Fury* or the concluding chapter of *Ulysses*.<sup>2</sup>

The students will want to demonstrate how the memories or thoughts of the narrator are linked, whether they are based on physical, emotional, or associative connections. Students should

practice manipulating detail to achieve their aims, and the instructor may wish to discuss the limitations of subjective symbols, best addressed through class discussion when the writers can see if class reaction matches their intent or desire.

(2) **CORRESPONDENCE.** Here the students tell a story through the exchange of letters between two or more characters. Since the students may not be familiar with this form of narrative, instructors may need to offer examples—passages from *Clarissa* or Gurney Norman's "A Correspondence," for example.

This is still in many ways subjective prose. The letter writers are closely tied to what they are writing and may be writing to someone they know well. What we, the readers, know about the letter writers is what they tell us and what we can infer from what they say and how they say it. Instructors, therefore, need to emphasize word choice and the paced revelation of character. Discussion of dialect and punctuation will be helpful, especially if the students attempt to imitate speech patterns in the characters' letters.

(3) **DRAMATIC MONOLOGUE.** The relationship between the elements in the rhetorical triangle becomes more abstract with this assignment for the narrator addresses an unidentified interlocutor. In many ways it is like recording just one side of a telephone conversation where, through word choice, the student must make clear both characters' attitudes, beliefs, and reactions. Example works could include Browning's "My Last Duchess" or "Andrea del Sarto" or Camus' *Fall*.

This assignment is an exercise in the subtle use of language. In group discussion the instructor should direct questions toward what the readers know about the characters involved, how they know it, and when. Word choice, detail, tone, and mood could all be closely analyzed in terms of the gradual revelation of character, setting, or plot.

(4) **DIARY.** In this assignment students tell a story through a series of dated diary entries. According to Moffett, a diary entry can be considered as "addressed neither to a certain person nor to the world at large. It represents a transition between addressing another character and addressing a reader. . ." (128). Such a diary is not a private journal meant only for the writer, but is a recording of the writer's thoughts and feelings meant to be read by someone removed in time. Daniel Keyes' *Flowers for Algernon* illustrates this point of view option.

Since this sequence of assignments moves from the most sub-

jective to the most objective points of view, this assignment might seem out of order, diary entries being perhaps more subjective than correspondence. However, the narrator-audience relationship must also be considered. With correspondence, the letter writer is addressing a *specific* audience, someone he or she may know intimately. In a diary entry, the writer is addressing an unknown audience.

With this assignment, the instructor should begin to move the students toward an investigation of what writing for an unknown audience entails, addressing the problem of private versus public writing. In fact, audience awareness becomes increasingly important as the student moves along the narrative sequence since the narrator and audience become increasingly separated in time and space.

Class discussion of work is an excellent way to help creative writing students avoid what Linda Flower has termed “writer-based prose”—prose which does not take into account the needs of its audience. Often, beginning creative writers fail to understand that their conceptions of characters, plot, mood, or tone in a work may not be shared by the reader. Peter Parisi believes that “the hold of this conceptual egocentrism can be loosened when the student writing is presented to the class. As a student’s text engages the social world of interpretation, the young writer’s too-intimate sense of his or her own meaning can be broadened” (63). Creative writing must be seen in a social context, in a world of interpreting readers, in a world where accessibility to writer-based prose can be severely limited.

(5) **DETACHED AUTOBIOGRAPHY.** In this assignment, students’ stories will involve a character telling of his own experiences shortly after the events of the narrative have taken place. The narrator is addressing the public in general and feels that his audience is interested in hearing his story. Since it is rare that anyone fully understands the importance of an event just after it has happened, the stories often reflect the uncertainties of the character’s understanding. Example works could include Updike’s “A&P” or Anderson’s “I Want to Know Why.”

The instructor should stress the central character’s inability to fully understand the events of the narrative and the use of language and detail to match the narrator’s age or level of perception. As with diary narration, the narrator is relating his or her thoughts and feelings concerning the events of the story. Unlike

diary entries, this assignment specifically asks students to write a full, connected narrative where the narrator is trying to gain some distance from the events of the narrative, hoping to explain or understand them. So, while the connection between the narrative and the narrator is still strong, some detachment is present. The audience, though unknown, is still considered interested and understanding.

In class, students should be asked questions that focus their attention on issues central to this point of view: What does the narrator know? How does the narrator know it? What are the limitations of the narrator's knowledge? How does the narrator express this knowledge?

A variation of this assignment can guide the students toward working with the unreliable narrator. Students can be asked to write stories where the narrator does not understand his situation at all or intentionally misrepresents it. Samples of some of the earlier dramatic monologues could be used as starting points.

(6) **MEMOIR OR OBSERVED NARRATION.** Students here write stories where the main character is remembering a past event in his life. Some time has passed since the events of the story have taken place and the narrator has some understanding of what happened and of its significance. The degree of the narrator's understanding is a variable under the author's control. The narrator is addressing a general audience, trying to recreate for them in some way that past event. Sample stories include Joyce's "Araby" and Malamud's "Black is My Favorite Color."

In this assignment, the narrator is moving further away in time and space from the narrative. Students are attempting to relate the narrator's memories as clearly as they deem necessary. While an untrustworthy narrator can again come into play, the main point of the assignment is to have the story's narrator in a position to manipulate, to pick and choose memories and details in a self-revealing way.

An option here is to stress the narrator's role as observer. Students can have the narrator recalling events that principally concern someone else but which were observed by the narrator, as in Katherine Brush's "Birthday Party." Using either option, the narrator is limited to what he has seen, heard, or been told, having free access to his own thoughts and feelings, no one else's.

(7) **BIOGRAPHY, SINGLE CHARACTER POINT OF VIEW.** In this assignment, the narrator is not a participant in the

events of the narrative being related. The narrator is limited to the inner life of the main character and the main character alone, as seen in Joyce's "A Little Cloud."

This assignment introduces a major shift in working with point of view, away from the personal "I" to the more impersonal "he." The distancing of the narrator from the narrative continues. Likewise, there is a broader distance between the narrator and the audience which is no longer able to identify a participating first person narrator in the work.

The shift can be made easier for students by pointing out that they have access to as much information as they have with autobiographical points of view—the main character can be revealed in as much psychological depth. Instructors will also want to stress the importance of narrative voice. Though the narrator is unseen and anonymous, students must learn to manipulate the story through selection, amplification, description, action, setting, mood, tone. Tone is an element of fiction beginning creative writing students often have a hard time understanding. Egocentric, writer-based fiction writers are often unaware that their attitudes toward the story can be revealed through the narrative voice. They must become aware that a problem may exist if the perceived tone of the story does not match their intent. Again, an issue like this will come up in class discussion; if not, the instructor can bring it up by asking class members what they feel the narrator's attitudes toward the narrative are.

Instructors may want to discuss with students what is lost and gained by the shift into third person. First person narrators can help a reader identify with a character more easily and allow the writer to use the narrator's voice and perceptions in telling the story. Yet, third person does gain in distance from the narrative which might encourage some students to deal with more personal, sensitive issues, believing that the reader would have been more likely to equate the author with the narrative "I." Students may also like the freedom of using a narrative voice not tied to any character.

(8) **Biography, Dual Character Point of View.** In this assignment students apply what they learned from the previous work to two characters, not just one. The narrator has complete access to the minds and hearts of two characters and can switch from one to the other whenever appropriate. A sample story for this point of view option is Anderson's "Unlighted Lamps."

This is a distancing assignment. For some beginning students, the biographical story, single character point of view will be nearly identical to a first person story. The author, who has been viewing the “I” narrator autobiographically, simply views the “he” character the same way.

With the dual character point of view, the instructor can begin moving the students toward adopting different roles. A good idea is to specify the kinds of characters the students must deal with: one old, one young; one a woman, one a man; one black, one white, depending on the student’s background. The purpose is to diffuse the narrative stance, to get different perspectives in a single work. The audience may have more difficulty identifying precisely where the narrator stands in the story since the narrator is free to adopt two completely different perspectives.

This assignment offers instructors a chance to demonstrate how transitions between various points of view in a story can be accomplished smoothly. Paraphrased dialogue and thought can be investigated as a way to change a story’s pace and students may begin to look at the use of irony, especially when their characters have quite different perspectives on similar issues. Instructors may also wish to discuss interpersonal conflict and developing tension in thought, dialogue, and action.

**(9) BIOGRAPHY, MULTIPLE CHARACTER POINT OF VIEW.** In a story using this point of view the narrator has free access to the inner lives of any characters he chooses. The narrator is omniscient; he knows the minds and hearts of every character in the work.

The movement toward an impersonal narrator continues in this assignment. The narrator is not just one or two characters, but all characters. There is no longer that close, intimate link between narrator and narrated. Yet, the instructor should stress that the students are still in control of their work. Despite the large number of possible perspectives, the story is being formed within the framework of the author’s consciousness and the author retains the ability to manipulate the narrative and characters in whatever way he or she wishes.

Specific issues the instructor can address include helping the students see what links exist, if any, between the narrator and the protagonist. Certainly, the link is weaker than in a first person story or even in a biographical, single character point of view piece. Several possible questions could be raised during class discussion:

Does the narrator identify with one character more than another? If the authors wish to identify with one character, more than another, what devices are at their disposal? With access to all the characters' inner lives, what exactly is the narrator's role? The questions might be asked when discussing a work like Joyce's "Boarding House."

(10) **BIOGRAPHY, NO CHARACTER POINT OF VIEW.**

At this point in the sequence, the narrator loses all access to the inner lives of the characters involved in the narrative. Characters can reveal themselves by what they say, how they act, or what they do, but the narrator cannot enter their minds or hearts and tell the reader exactly what their thoughts and feelings are. The narrator, after diffusing himself among all characters, disappears from the story and, like the reader, becomes a spectator, merely describing and recording. The narrator can relate only what he has seen or sees, or what he has heard others say. One of the best ways to describe this point of view to a student is in terms of drama, viewing the narrator as a member of a play's audience. Sample works include "The Killers" by Hemingway and Alain Robbe-Grillet's "The Secret Room."

The relationship between narrator and narrative is at an extreme. Instead of the two being intimately connected, the narrator is purposely detached from the narrative and does not enter the inner lives of the characters. The relationship between narrator and the audience is also at an extreme with the audience being unable to locate the narrator in the narrative, experiencing the story from a spectator's position.

Instructors will want to emphasize choices of language, action, and setting—all students have at their disposal to influence audience response. Group work and reaction are invaluable aids in helping the students match the results of their work against their aims.

The sequence of assignments presented here would stretch out over an entire semester or year and could be integrated, as has been noted, with instruction in other elements of fiction. If an instructor does not wish to follow so long a sequence, the assignments can be modified. For instance, students can concentrate on one basic narrative and write at least the first two or three opening pages of the story from the various points of view.

No matter what format is used when teaching point of view, instructors should (1) present their students with the range of options available to them, (2) guide them to an understanding of the merits and limitations of each point of view by having them use each in work that will be read and critiqued by the class, and (3) present point of view with a clear, accessible framework that leads students to understand what relationships exist between various options. Moffett's sequence of narrative types offers the creative writing instructor the chance to accomplish all three goals.

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### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>For a more complete discussion of these issues see Brashers 161-170.

<sup>2</sup>For an anthology of short fiction based on the sequence of narrative types see Moffett and McElheny.

### WORKS CITED

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