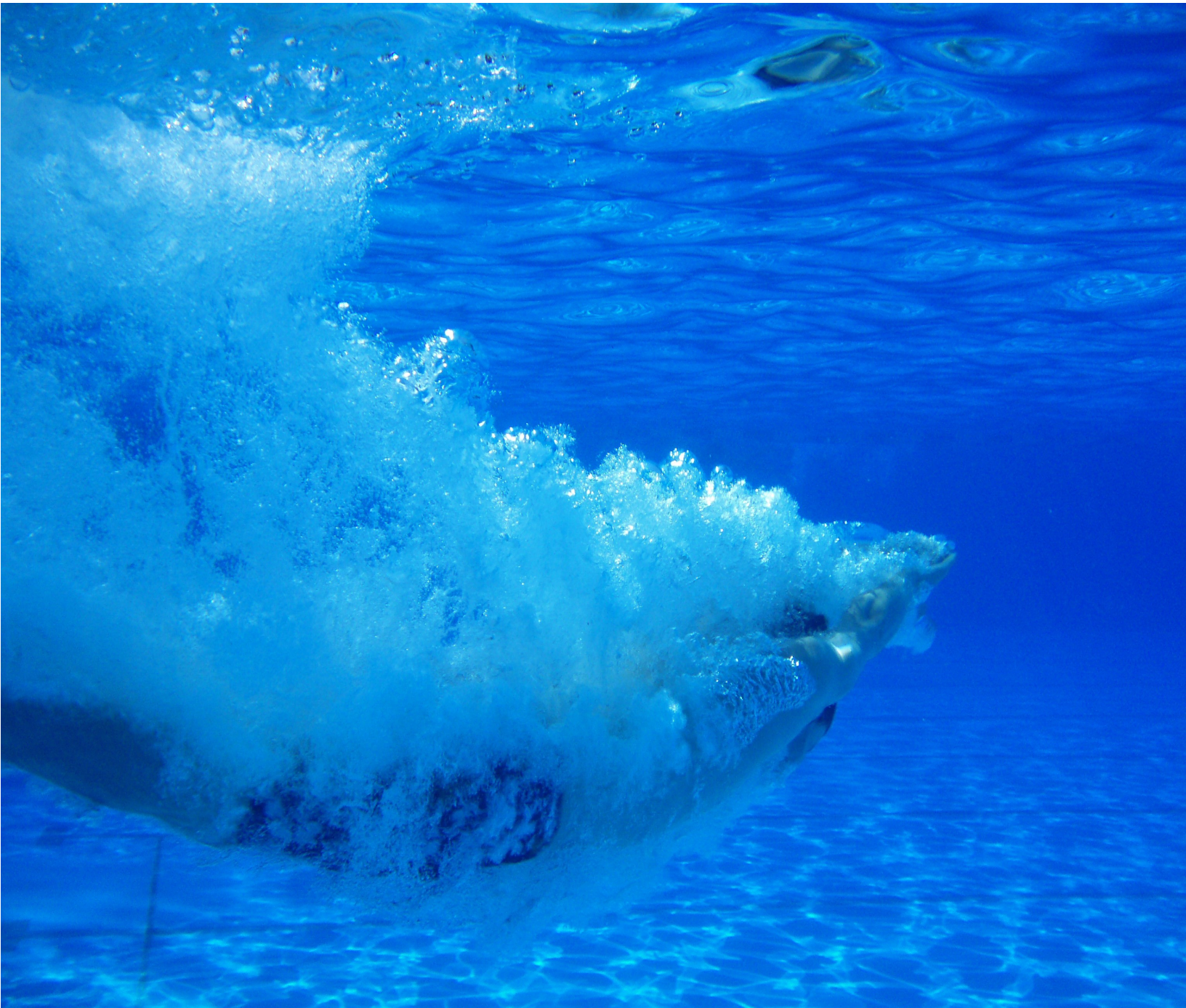


# Taking the Plunge into Deep Point of View



from the blog series

by Jordan McCollum

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## Introduction

Have you ever gotten comments from critique partners and readers that they wanted to feel “closer” to your characters? Have you heard “Deep POV” tossed around so many times that it’s a buzz word—and you *still* don’t know what it means?

By request, I wrote this series to help us all understand what deep POV is and how to effectively convey deep POV in our writing—get inside our characters’ heads and show their experiences to the reader through the characters’ eyes.

At the end of each section, there are some questions for thought. If you’d like to join in the discussion on the blog, please do. Just click on the heading of any section to jump to that post.

I hope these articles and questions, as well as the recommended resources, help you in creating deep POV!

Photo credits: plunge—[Konrad Mostert](#)

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## What is deep POV?

Welcome to our series on taking the plunge into the **deep end of point-of-view**!

Ordinarily, a discussion of deep POV looks in-depth at the [history of point-of-view](#) in fiction. Feel free to read Alicia Rasley's article (linked there) if that's what you want to do. For our purposes, we're just going to look at what's most popular now—and this is one trend that we all have to pay attention to. For better or for worse, **deep POV is the default mode of storytelling today** (other than first person, of course).



So what *is* deep POV? Interestingly, it's very like the other major mode of narration today, first person. In first person ("I did this and that."), we are limited to only what the protagonist/narrator thinks, feels, perceives and guesses. Just like you can't read others' thoughts, a first person narrator can't know what other characters are thinking. Similarly, in deep POV third person ("He did this and that."), we are **limited to the thoughts, feelings, perceptions and guesses of a single narrator per scene**.



Of course, that's just third-person limited mode. **What makes a point of view "deep" is how "close" we are to the viewpoint character's thoughts.** In a distant third-person mode, we may be privy to few of the character's direct thoughts, and those are always related in italics. We may rely more on their actions and speech to characterize and understand them. Often, we're acutely aware of what the viewpoint character is doing, as if **we're watching them with a tight focus**, and every once in a while we get a voiceover of his or her thoughts (mmm, [Burn Notice](#)).

In deep POV, the character's thoughts can form almost a running commentary on the actions of the story. We don't just get the occasional *The problem with blackmail is that it's like a gun with only one bullet* or *Yeah, the mob isn't exactly known for its cushy retirement and severance package*. Statements like that—direct thoughts from the viewpoint characters' heads—are woven into the narration. In very deep POV, those statements might not even be italicized.

Sometimes, you can get so deep into POV that we don't "hear" the "author's" voice in narration, but the character's. (And that can be awesome.) **Everything we, the readers, get is as if we were seeing it through that character's eyes** (or brain, since we get a lot of his/her processing, too). We don't just watch this character and his or her actions—we don't see the character looking out the window. We see what s/he sees through the window. **We seem to live the character's experiences ourselves.**



That's a powerful narration mode—and that's why deep POV has become so popular.

In pure deep POV, "**head hopping**," or peeking into the thoughts of other characters within a single scene, is never allowed. Of course, a number of well-known, multi-published authors do this, but in general, new authors have to show that they truly understand point-of-view (oh, and sell books) before they can flout its conventions. In deep POV, you can have more than one viewpoint character, but to change between them, you *have* to insert a scene break. No matter how smooth or lovely you think your POV change is (and really, it might be masterful), it destroys the illusion of seeing the world through one character's eyes and throws readers off.

Coming up this month, we'll be looking at deep POV in detail. We'll draw lessons from awesome articles around the web on how to show our character's perceptions and worldviews. I'll be reading from Alicia Rasley's book, [The Power Of Point Of View](#) (as soon as it arrives; shipped yesterday!). And I already have some ideas for fun practice exercises for getting into our characters' heads and seeing the world from their perspective.

**What would you like to learn about deep POV? What do you like or dislike about the most popular narration mode today?**

*Photo credits: plunge—[Konrad Mostert](#); man looking out window—[Ben Husmann](#); city view—[Mihai Estatiu](#)*

## Getting into a character's head

As we discussed last week, writing in deep POV means being very close to our characters' thoughts, feelings and perceptions. One of the most basic things we have to do to write in deep POV is to **understand what our characters are thinking and feeling**.



But since our characters are individuals who are at least somewhat distinct from us authors, this can be a challenge. How can we ever hope to understand the thoughts and emotions of people who aren't us? After all, we can't experience the thoughts and emotions of our parents, spouses or friends—we can never truly understand exactly what they feel.

My favorite trick for this was inspired by [\*How to Write a Damn Good Mystery\*](#) by James N. Frey. He explains that the kernel of any mystery is found in the villain, so that's the first character he recommends designing. Once you've determined the physical, psychological and sociological aspects of the character, he recommends **interviewing the character**.

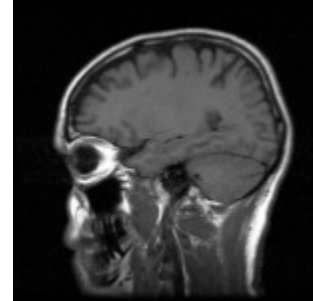
I'll admit it sounds a little hokey to me. So instead of directly interviewing the character, I do a slightly different exercise: I **write something short in that character**. Sometimes I'll pick a specific point in the story to "set" this character journal, usually either right before or right after the beginning.

To help get into the character's head, first I've already **come to know the character well**—I've at least contemplated the life events that have brought him here, his attitudes, his interpersonal relationships. If it's the villain, I know what he's capable of (though sometimes I use the journal technique to figure out his motive).

While I'm not a fan of drawn-out character questionnaires, I do find it much easier to write if I have at least a vague idea of the characters—and writing the character journal helps to firm up my vague ideas and make them concrete. At least once, I wrote a journal and a scene when I was well into revisions, and it *still* helped me to discover things about my protagonist, who'd carried probably 60-70% of my manuscript.

But I think the biggest thing that helped was to **write in first person, if only for this little section**. As you write (and yes, I know this also sounds hokey), *act*: **pretend to be that person, experiencing these feelings, thoughts and events**. How do you feel about what has happened?

You could also try **rewriting scenes from your story in first person**. As you write, again, *act*, pretend. Close your eyes and visualize what happens in the scene, but not as someone else might see it—from the character's vantage point. What do you notice? How does that make you feel? What do you think about?



When I've done this, like I said, it helps me get to know my characters better, even if I've already worked with them for a hundred thousand words. In fact, I often do this long-hand, and I've even seen my handwriting change as I delve more deeply into someone else's thoughts, feelings and perceptions.

**What do you do to really come to know your characters? How do you come to understand how your characters would think, speak and act (and react)?**

*Photo credits: plunge—[Konrad Mostert](#); head scan—[Max Brown](#)*

## Techniques to establish deep POV

When we're writing in deep POV, as writers, we have to get deep into our characters' heads. We have to know what they're seeing, feeling and thinking. But how do we get our readers into our characters' heads, too (I mean, isn't it getting a little crowded in here?).



### **Open in that point of view**

Start the scene in the POV character's head as opposed to, say, using someone else's (or possibly even the POV character's) dialogue. While an interesting line of dialogue may make a good hook, it can also make it harder to

figure out whose head we're in, and how we should interpret that line. This is especially important in the very first scene ([an example of this from Edittorrent](#)).

**When we begin a scene *in* the character—talking about what they're seeing, doing, feeling, perceiving—it gives our readers a clearer idea of what's happening and just whose thoughts they'll be privy to for at least this scene.** You're not required to make sure the first character named in the scene is the POV character, but it can help orient your readers if you're using multiple viewpoint characters, and especially if you have more than one of them in the scene ([another Edittorrent example](#)).

## Open with an anchor

Sometimes I get so into opening inside a character's head that I make the mistake of opening scenes right inside their thoughts. For example, opening a scene like this:

Why was this her cross to bear? Why did it have to happen this way?

And on for several more lines. Say this is from the middle of a story and we only have one female POV character. The reader can figure out pretty quickly who's thinking this—but let's not make the reader work to figure out what's going on.



When we open in a POV character's head, we usually need some sort of **anchor to let us know who, when and where we are:**

Jessica flipped through the pages of her father's journal in disbelief. Why was this her cross to bear? Why did it have to happen this way?

Note that this is totally, completely my opinion, but it's an opinion I've arrived at from inspecting my own work closely.



## How do you establish POV in your scenes? What techniques do you use early on to make sure we know whose head we're in?

Photo credits: door—[Vinicio Capossela](#); anchor—[Andrea Kratzenberg](#)

### Deep POV: the view from inside your character's head

So how *do* we know how our characters think? Maybe you completed the [character freewrite or interview](#) exercises last week. Maybe you've filled out extensive character questionnaires. Maybe you only have a sketchy mental picture of a new character. No matter how well you know your character, you can help to make sure her thoughts—her *voice*, her feelings—come through in your writing in what she notices, how she talks/thinks about it and how she feels about it.

#### What they notice

My friend Annette posted the other day about "[lenses](#)." She tells how on a visit to New York with her mother and sisters, they were each drawn to attractions that **appealed to their personal interests**—things that the rest of the family didn't even notice.



Personal interests for your characters might arise from simply the need to "round them out" and make them more full, or they can influence the plot (she hates baseball? Fantastic—he's a semi-pro shortstop.). When you're just starting to design a character, even one simple interest can help to [create deeper characterization](#).

Does your character have a passion for painting? Collect baseball cards and rare comics? Live for *the dance*? If not, why not? Everyone has something he loves&hobbies, interests, even their occupation. The architect might admire the layout of the museum while her dabbling-in-interior-decorating sister is more focused on the color scheme. Their wannabe-artist father, of course, is there for the art, while their hobby-Egyptologist mother wants to hurry up and get to the mummies.

**Our personal interests often filter what we see around us.** The father in the above family might be the only one who really notices the paintings, but he barely glances at the dessicated bodies. These interests also influence our perceptions of those things that we do manage to notice.

## Character vocabulary

A character's personal interests, hobbies and especially profession not only filter what they notice, but **the words they use to describe** it—from the scenery to the events to the other people in the story.

I, for example, can't tell a sloop from a schooner. But someone who spends every weekend on his sailboat is going to have a full vocabulary for not just every type of ship, but the masts, the rigging, the knots, the . . . other stuff.



Let's say that character identifies himself, essentially, as a sailor, despite his day job in sales (\*snicker\*). When he meets a beautiful woman, is he going to think of her using the vocabulary of fashion? He might like the cut of her jib (that's a sailing term trying to be a play on "fashion" and "cut," not an innuendo), but unless she's wearing a spinnaker (another sailing term—a sail. Very Little Mermaid.), I doubt he cares much about her dress.

Instead, he might use more . . . you know, "nautical" terms—**the vocabulary of his passion**. At this point, I've made it fairly obvious that I know *nothing* about sailing, but for lack of anything better, he might describe how she moves through the clumps of people like a cutter slicing through the waves. She could have eyes the color of the sea, hair the same shade as the burnished mahogany fittings of his cabin. (Okay, this dude is really starting to wax poetic for a guy, but maybe the sea does that to some people.)

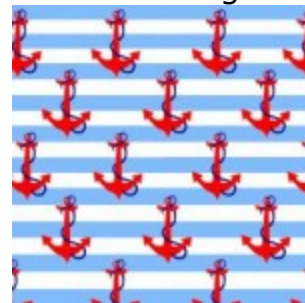
The more parallels our character can draw to the things around him and his passions, the more likely he is to like those things.

## Character attitudes

The character's attitude toward the things and people around him is another important aspect of his character—and his voice. Perhaps most importantly, character attitudes are a strong characterization tool. **When we see how someone feels about the world around him, we really get to know him.** If he recoils at a church and quotes Karl Marx to himself ("Religion is the opiate of the masses."), we know him more deeply than if the author just told us that "Jimmy hated religion."

Again, **his interests, hobbies and profession can influence this heavily.** Our sailor friend might think a man whose only maritime

experience was on a ferry to be a troglodyte. Put your character working in an urban environment. Freeway tunnels are the epitome of all that's wrong with the city—they're closed in, suffocating, dark, crowded, and most of all, nothing like the freedom of sailing, the open ocean, the wind in your face.



On the other hand, he loves taking his lunch on the observation deck of his building—when the wind is right, you get a breeze from the sea. He has an immediate affinity for people who strike him as sailors. And your Nautica bathroom decor? Well, you decide—he could either love the touch of sailing in your home, or he could think you're a total poseur.

The slob might not even see the pile of clean (or are they dirty?) socks on the floor, simply walking past. But her neat-freak roommate is sure to notice—and she sees whether they're clean, dirty, or a mix of the two—and then *what does she think of her slovenly roommate?* (Hello, Odd Couple!) If the neat-freak is a housekeeper or maybe a professional organizer, does she have a specific term for someone like her roomie?

**What other ways can we incorporate and convey our characters' voices?**

*Photo credits: 3D glasses—[Harry Fodor](#); Sailboat—[Horton Group](#); Anchor print—[mckenna71](#)*

## Your character's thoughts—in real time

So we've established that it's important to [get your readers into your character's head right at the start of the scene](#), and to [convey the character's voice](#). Once you've got that down, we stay in deep POV by **living the character's perceptions and thoughts—including their thought process—along with them.**

### **Show, don't tell—for real**

The deeper the POV, the more important it is to show instead of tell. In a fairly limited POV, you often get simply the conclusions the character reaches: "She was dowdy." "He was tall." In deeper POV, we want to **see more of the character's thoughts that led to these conclusions.**

Contrast these two:

Andrea turned around to find a very tall, very angry man looming behind her.

Andrea turned around to find a set of shirt buttons. Shirt buttons? She followed the column of buttons up, her neck arching back to peer at the scowl looming above the crisp collar.



In both passages, we get that the man's considerably taller than Andrea, and that's he unhappy. You could take the showing further by describing the scowl. This all depends on the context—if she's only got enough time to catch a glimpse of him before he robs her/hits her/runs away, you'll want to skip to the conclusion. If meeting this man is important or you want a specific effect, you can draw it out even more.

This showing requires you to create images that your readers can visualize through specific detail.



## Use detail

Detail helps us to sets us in place. Using our characters' interests and passions as a guide to what they notice and how they talk about it, we can convey a stronger sense of the events, people and places in our story.

**Be specific** in your detail. Specific images convey much more meaning than vague, generic references. A Beemer gives a very different interpretation than a beater, and both of which are more useful to us as writers than the word "car."

## Then draw the conclusion

The conclusions our characters reach about people, places and events are more powerful when they're supported by details. But instead of laying out the character's conclusion and then backing it up with the specific evidence, take things in a **logical order to make those conclusions comprehensible and powerful**.

So, first we notice the details (through showing, not telling), and then we put those specific details together to come to a conclusion. Here's another comparison to illustrate the difference:

Jack hid in the corner just before Erica walked in. She was eager to see him. She scanned the room for him.



No true details, conclusion first—this comes off to me as very much "telling" instead of "showing."

Jack hid in the corner just before Erica walked in. Leaning forward, she casting her eyes about hopefully, eyebrows drawn up as if she silently asked herself where he was. She was eager to see him.

This paints a much more vivid picture—we know what Jack sees, and with the detail, we see it ourselves. In this instance, **the detail might be so strong we don't need the conclusion at all**.

Now, everything has its reasonable limits. The amount of detail—or even its

use at all—depends, of course, on the specific context. We can skip to conclusions in the middle of a car chase. The hero and heroine meeting for the first time calls for a bit more notice of detail. **To keep the thoughts “feeling” like real time, be sure to match the amount of detail—and how you work it in—with the pace.**

**How do you show your characters’ thought process to help portray the places, events and people in your story?**

*Photo credits: buttons—[Emily Lucima](#); eyes—[Charlie Balch](#)*

## Eliminate “scaffolding” for elegant deep POV

When you see a building under construction, your eyes are naturally drawn not to the building, but to the latticework of metal encasing its facade. In writing, the same attention to certain words and phrases—in this case “head words”—creates the same effect.



Sometimes we use phrases like “he thought” or “she knew” to reinforce the POV character’s connection with the thoughts in narration. But **instead of drawing our readers’ attention to the character’s thoughts, too many of these phrases can draw attention to that scaffolding—the words that encase the character’s thoughts.** Remember the example we used [early on](#) of watching a character looking out the window versus seeing the view ourselves?

This passage from the otherwise excellent [Scene & Structure](#) by Jack Bickham exemplifies the thinking behind this problem:

Failure to use constructions that show viewpoint is quite common, and, we can be thankful easy to fix. . . .

Consider the following statements:

The cold wind blew harder.

A gunshot rang out.  
It was terrifying.

These are fine observations, but in none of them do we know where the viewpoint is. Ordinarily you should recast such statements to emphasize the viewpoint, thus:

**She felt** the cold wind blow harder.  
**He heard** a gunshot ring out.  
It was terrifying, **she thought**. Or:  
Terror crept through her.(89)

I can't say whether it's just publishing trends or the version of deep POV that's au courant, but today, publishing trends have moved far, far away from his "fixes" (other than the last one, of course). Today, such "scaffold fixes" smack of showing instead of telling.

## Showing versus telling

By emphasizing the viewpoint character in these sentences, we are doing exactly what Bickham wants us to—*show* the viewpoint. However, **we're telling what that character is [seeing/feeling/hearing](#)**.

The question readers should be asking upon reading a sentence like Bickham's first examples isn't "Who's seeing/feeling/hearing this?" It's **"What's next?"**

Naturally, these examples are pretty much begging for this kind of scaffolding—because they're in isolation. If you start your scene with a sentence like any of these (without a clear POV, that is), then yes, readers could be confused whose POV you're in. You must establish the viewpoint character early on—but not by *telling*.

The cold wind blew harder and Jack flipped up the collar of his coat.  
He hated the winter.  
A gunshot rang out. Maria flung herself under the nearest car  
before the terror could even register.

If you [establish the POV](#) at the beginning of the scene, and continue to show your character's thoughts throughout the scene, simple declarations and observations of the world around him don't require you, the author, to tell us that the POV character is the one seeing/feeling/tasting, etc. **Cutting back the unnecessary scaffolding lets the elegant architecture of the sights and senses of your story shine through.**



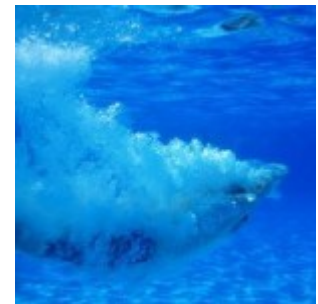
**What do you think? Don't you want to wish me a happy fifth wedding anniversary? Do you notice "scaffolding" or head words when you're reading? Do you try to avoid them while writing? Or do you see them as a useful tool to establish viewpoint?**

*Photo credits: scaffolding—[Paula Navarro](#); Colosseum—[Hannah Di Yanni](#)*

## [Using head words the right way](#)

Deep POV is popular—almost to the exclusion of any other kind of third-person POV. And as such, there have been a lot of rules promulgated about how to [create](#) and [maintain](#) deep POV.

But, in case you're new here, I'm an iconoclast when it comes to arbitrary writing rules. Some of those arbitrary rules that help no one include "never use the character's name in deep POV," and "never use 'head words' including 'he thought,' 'she assumed,' or 'he realized.'" Although [head words can often distance our readers](#) from our writing and should often be avoided, I'm with editor/author [Alicia Rasley on this one](#):



I don't know how to say it any better than this (and you know it anyway, so this is aimed at those others), but you cannot create deep POV by following a list of rules like "Never use the POV character's name" or "never have the narrator report that she saw something; just say what she saw." You can only do a good job with deep POV if you know your character so well you know how she thinks, and she will not think the same way another character



does, and she might not think the same way in every situation!

Sometimes these verboten head words are actually useful: **they can keep from ejecting your readers** from the deep POV you've worked to hard to establish, and **they can add nuances to the character's thought processes**. Both of these are examples of the technique of [using detail, then drawing the conclusion](#).

## Nuanced thought processes

Granted, in a lot of amateur writing, there are a lot of gratuitous head words: "His suit looked like a bad '70s prom tux, Jenny thought to herself." However, specific head words can add nuance to our characters' thought processes—they can **show how our characters came to their conclusions**, rather than just . . . well, jumping to conclusions.

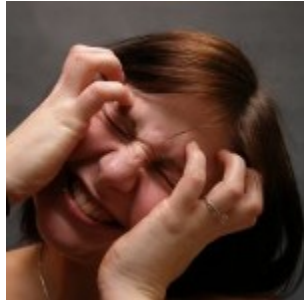
Would these sentences convey the same thing without the head words (and yeah, I'm being a little tricky in using a so-called "head word" as the main verb here, but whatever)?

- She could never understand him.
- She realized she could never understand him.
- She thought she could never understand him.
- She knew she could never understand him. (And is that different from "She just knew she could never understand him."?)
- She could never understand him, she reminded herself.
- She decided she could never understand him.

Each of those head words **adds something to the meaning, showing us how this character came to that knowledge**—it's something new, or something she should have learned by now, or something she's trying to convince herself of. That's an important role for head words—unless we just want our characters to have constant epiphanies.

## Reading other characters' minds to not eject readers

Another example of using detail and then showing the conclusion is how we show other character's emotions and even movements through the eyes of our characters. If we fail to do this, it can frustrate our readers and push them out of our character's POV.



Now, this *is* a time to avoid head words ([and scaffolding](#)). At the same time, however, **we have to be careful to make it clear that we're not hopping heads**. One example of this is in observing other characters' emotions. If we're in Timmy's POV and we just flat out state "Jane felt sad," (aside from being telling instead of showing), it seems like we're suddenly in Jane's POV.

Other characters' movements can also present this problem. Another example from [Alicia Rasley](#), on the sentence "Joan walked in from the kitchen," disrupting the deep POV from Tom's viewpoint [emphasis added]:

Sometimes as I read a passage, I feel ejected, like suddenly I'm not in Tom's mind, I'm in Joan's mind, or dangling helplessly in between. When I go back and read to figure out why, it's often actually a deep POV issue, where the writer has Tom interpreting something from the way Joan speaks or behaves... but because there's no "Tom thought" in there, **it sounds like JOAN**.

Okay, let me backtrack. While Tom cannot know what Joan is thinking, **he can definitely interpret**. This is not weird for the reader, as of course, the reader also cannot read minds but can interpret body language, tone of voice, facial expression, etc. But of course, Tom might or might not be good at this. He might be really empathic and intuitive and see a twitch of her lips and know she's lying, or he could be the clueless type who thinks he knows what that lip-twitch means ("Oh, she's going to sneeze!") but is wrong. But... the important thing is that **if it's significant, if you want the READER to interpret also, the POV character has to notice and narrate it**.

As I said before, this is another example of detail-conclusion. Just like we

interpret other people's emotions from their tone and body language, **our characters can note other characters' expressions and *then* interpret** how they're feeling. Or maybe they don't need to interpret at all—maybe leaving it to the readers is even better in some cases.

**What do you think? Are there any other uses for "head words"?  
What makes these uses okay but so many other uses bad?**

Photo credits: *plunge*—[Konrad Mostert](#); *frustrated*—[John De Boer](#)

## Why some great books just don't make good movies: powerful POV

For some strange reason, *The Jacksons: An American Dream* was on TV a couple weeks ago (gee, I wonder why). My dad and I got sucked in near the beginning, expecting to understand Michael's descent into . . . well, madness.

It started off promising. The beginning showed the Jackson 5 practicing their music and dancing, and the rigors of their lives. It showed the psychological relationships of the characters. But instead of delving deeper and deeper into Michael's psyche over time, the movie seemed to pull back. As Michael seems to push his family away to pursue a solo career, we see less and less of him—**and it feels like we're being pushed away**, too. We go from seeing his insecurities and fears to looking in at Neverland *from the outside*, just like we always have.



Part of the problem was that this movie was made in 1992, after Michael established a successful solo career, but before he began the descent into . . . well, you know. But as my dad and I discussed how disappointed we were with the movie's lack of depth or resolution, I realized that sometimes our attempts at deep POV do the same thing to our readers. **We leave them watching from the outside when what they really want is to be inside the characters, living and understanding them.**

I think part of the challenge with writing deep POV, as Alicia Rasley points out in [The Power Of Point Of View](#), is that many of us **see the action of a story in a very cinematic way—as if we were watching a movie** (185). In a movie, the camera follows a character, but jumps around between perspectives easily. You can be in the front of the courtroom watching Jack McCoy as he questions the witness, then quick-as-a-flash, you're in the gallery, watching the witness crack.



While this is a powerful technique, *point of view has always been a limitation of film*. There has never been and may never be a satisfactory adaptation of [Jane Eyre](#) or [The Great Gatsby](#), because in those works and in works like them, the experience isn't just about what we can see happening—it's **about what happens inside the narrators**.

Without narration, we can't see that Gatsby's smile assumes the best of us, as if he had faith in us. When Robert Redford smiles, it's attractive, of course, but it's just a smile—because that assertion, that his smile assumes the best of us, isn't rooted in empirical fact. It doesn't come from just what Nick Carraway sees. It's rooted in Nick's perception and interpretation of what he sees.

**As writers, we can give our readers the connection they want with our characters' thoughts and feelings.** We don't have to just watch what has played out on the screens of our mind. We are not camera men! We can get into our characters' heads, show their thoughts, feelings, and attitudes, and truly transport our readers so they feel like they're living the experience with us. This is a strength of the medium—so use it!

*But that's not to say deep POV is always best or even right for our story. Read the series' guest post on [when not to use deep POV](#)!*

*Photo credits: movie—[G & A Scholiers](#); cameraman: [Jannes Glas](#)*



## Deep POV questions and answers

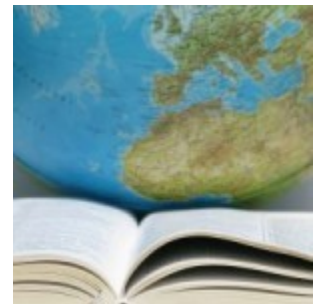
I should preface this by saying that I'm not an expert—we'll have the expert on POV, Alicia Rasley, with a guest post to conclude the series. But I'm happy to give my opinion on your questions, and I'd love to get your opinions. (Plus, I have a question, too—check it out at the end.)

### Deep POV and World building

[Iapetus999](#) says:

I guess my issue is that I have a bunch of world-building to do (SF genre) so how do I do that in deep POV? If I can't be a narrator explaining the physics of tethered space stations, then how do I get my characters to do it? My characters already know how their world works. They wind up doing things that makes sense to them (and to me) but my readers don't get it. So something's missing. Ideas?

That's a tough one—truly, a real conundrum. I have this problem all the time with characters who either a.) would never, ever sit around describing their every day world or b.) think and speak in slang or obscure terms that not every reader is going to understand, but everyone else in the scene would.



The classic deep POV solution is to **bring in an outsider who will require some sort of explanation**, or who'll draw attention to the things that other native characters don't even see anymore. That doesn't always work, of course. Another approach might be to **give one of your characters some sort of emotional reaction to the setting**—she's against something about the station for scientific, moral or political reasons, etc. They're more likely to notice it (and, thus, describe it) when they care.

Of course, I don't know of many people with emotional reactions to physics principles. Another option might be to add brief scenes early on to help establish not only the characters but their physical world—conducting scientific tests, maintenance, observations, or even scenes where the characters themselves are showing of the physics principles in their

movement.

And when the information is really obscure, sometimes you can get away with one or two unobtrusive sentences conveying information that the POV character might already know, as it relates to the context of the scene and doesn't duplicate information in dialogue, etc.

Of course, it's **always possible to pull out of deep POV for something like this**. But at the same time, a prologue from the author on the physics of tethered space stations is probably going to be one of those parts readers skip. On the other hand, if you can weave the description (or scientific principles) into a scene and make it *matter*, it's more likely to stick with your reader at least long enough to understand the story.

### Any other suggestions?

## Inner thoughts, narration and deep POV

[Trisha Puddle](#) says:

Hi, Jordan. First of all I want to tell you that this is my favourite blog. I'm learning so much from your posts and they have improved my writing so much. Thanks for that.

Thank you! And you're welcome 😊 .

. . . I'm . . . now aware that characters can't see things through the back of their heads and they don't notice the colour of their own eyes, but I sometimes struggle with their inner thoughts and end up with narration instead of deep POV. I have to make sure that I think and feel like an eight year old, which isn't hard for me, but I end up slipping out of deep POV sometimes.

May I be so bold as to give this sample for your advice? Is it in deep POV yet?

"You're still grounded, Molly." Her mother headed toward the kitchen.

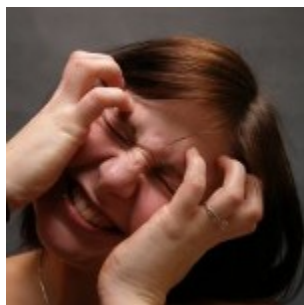
Molly shuffled behind her. She grabbed the knives and forks out of the drawer and placed them on the table. If only she hadn't lost her temper and wiped rotten duck eggs on Angela. And why did she have to go and make gobbling sounds at the headmistress? She hadn't meant it to be so loud. Now she'd miss out on precious time with Furbie.

Kate came back to the kitchen and handed Molly a disc. "Here, I've copied the photos of Furbie for you."

Molly gave Kate a sad little smile. "Thanks. I won't get to see Furbie anymore. I'm grounded for a week." Tears clouded her eyes and she ran upstairs to her bedroom. After slamming the door, she threw herself on her bed and punched her pillow. She growled like a grizzly bear, "Grrr." She wasn't hungry now.

I'm not an expert on MG and this obviously isn't a critique, but the POV here looks pretty good to me. The second paragraph seems especially good in that respect (though I'm not familiar enough with MG to know whether we need the review of the things she's done wrong, and obviously you may or may not have just spent the first part of this scene discussing them).

In the last paragraph, obviously we're in Molly's POV, so the "sad little smile" she gives Kate at the end may or may not work—I see and probably use something like that a lot, but **does she know her smile is little and sad, or does she make a conscious effort to make them that way?**



I'd also like a little more insight into exactly what she's feeling there. She goes from a sad smile and tears in her eyes to door slamming, punching and growling. In these paragraphs, we see a good view of her penitence and regret, but the rest of the emotional progression could be a little clearer, since we're in her head with her. (It's kinda crowded, I know, but it's where lots of readers like to be.)

**Any other suggestions on the POV depth here?**

## When not to use deep POV

[Eileen Astels Watson](#) says:

The deeper POV and more consistent you are, the better for me. I've been writing with two POV's per book, so when I want distance from one character I switch to the other's POV, but I can see where writers would vary the depth if writing in one POV to help keep some unknowns afloat.

I agree, though you have to be very careful with this. Generally speaking, it's not okay to keep secrets from the reader when the POV character knows those facts and they're pertinent to the story. If the whole book is in deep POV except for sections where the deep POV character would be thinking about those facts that would make or break the mystery, for example, the reader will probably feel cheated. While you can mislead the reader, **you can't flat out lie to them—if the POV character knows something, your reader should, too.**

However, there are **certain types of scenes where deep POV doesn't work** so well. My favorite example is a scene showing a deep emotion. We need some of the character's thoughts to understand what they're feeling, but sometimes reading their thoughts directly isn't the most powerful way to get our readers to feel those same emotions. Alicia Rasley talks about effectively portraying deep, emotional scenes in her articles "[Emotion without Sentiment](#)" and "[Emotion is Physical](#)."

## My question: family titles and deep POV

I'm divided on this issue in my WIP, so I'd like to hear your opinions. When reading something in fairly deep POV, **is it more natural to refer to the POV character's family members as "his dad" or just "Dad"?** Both have their advantages and disadvantages in my opinion, and I've seen both in first-person as well. I'm still pretty torn, so I'm turning it over to you.



**So what do you think on all of these issues?**

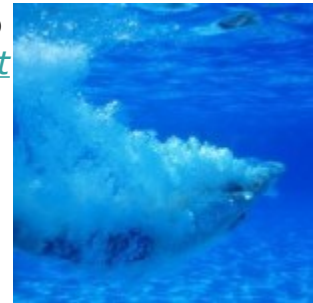


## So when shouldn't you use deep POV?

By [Alicia Rasley](#)

Let me start by saying that there are no absolutes in fiction-writing. Deep POV is now trendy, and it's appropriate for many types of stories, and also for our highly interactive culture. However, it's only one of several POV approaches, and it's not right for every genre, every book, and every author.

First, I should quickly define deep point of view. (I go into this in much greater depth in my book, [The Power of Point of View](#).) Deep POV is a variety of single POV, where an entire scene (or chapter, or book) is told through the perspective (or point of view) of one of the characters in the scene. Deep POV takes this further—the narration is done not just in the perspective but in the voice of the POV character. **It's meant to establish almost no distance between the narrator and the reader**—rather like a first-person feel with third-person pronouns. Here's an example:



Allie thought Saturday was never going to come. All day Friday she kept waiting for school to be over, but it was taking forever. Every time Allie looked at the watch her daddy had bought her for Christmas, the numbers had barely changed at all. She thought maybe the battery wasn't so good anymore, but if it wasn't, then the clocks at school weren't working either, 'cause when her teacher dismissed them for lunch, it was the exact time on Allie's watch that it was s'posed to be. (Tara Taylor Quinn, *Jacob's Girls*.)

The character is a child, and so the deep-POV narration uses the diction and sentence construction of a child. This lets the reader get an intense experience of who this person is and how she thinks.

Very useful. However, there are two points I want to make:

1. Most writers who think they're doing deep POV aren't. They are doing single POV and confining the narration to one character's thoughts and perceptions (and that's FINE). But they are writing more in their own voice. There's nothing wrong with that (single POV is by far the most common and accepted POV approach). What's wrong is the writers who say they're doing deep POV because they're following a list of rules they got from somewhere, like "In deep POV, you never use the character's name, and you never use 'she thought'." Deep POV is not about rules. **It's about being so into the character that you feel with her body, think with her mind, and write with her voice.** It's writing from inside the character, and those rules imposed from the outside? Worse than useless.
2. Deep POV is not right for every story.

And since (2) is what I'm supposed to address in this blog post, let me get going on that.

### **A) Deep POV is not right for every author.**

I've concluded that most of us have a natural POV approach, one that feels comfortable and right for us. And we can learn to write in other POVs, but when we're writing most naturally, we're probably going to write in our natural POV, and that's going to sound most authentic. I'm not saying you should only write in your natural POV (my natural is single-third POV, but I've been writing a lot of first-person and enjoying it). **But you shouldn't feel you have to force yourself to write deep POV if every word feels wrong.**

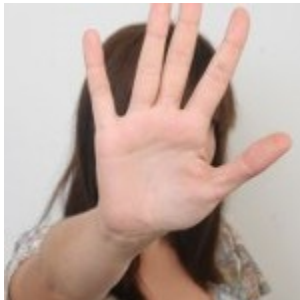
Why might it feel wrong? Well, if you've spent a lot of time working on your own voice, making it beautiful and evocative, you might not want to cede control of your prose style to a character. I'm an English teacher, and I spend way too much time every semester helping students distinguish sentences from fragments and comma splices.

Every time I write in deep POV, I find myself echoing the character (as I should in deep POV), who is invariably uncaring of grammar, not to mention easily distracted. So half his sentences are actually fragments, and half of hers are run-ons. That might be quite effective. But what if one of my

students would brandish a highlighted page of Tony's POV and yell, "Fragments all over the place!" (Well, actually, if one of my students could so effectively identify fragments, I'd give him an A right away. 😊)

Many writers are proud of their voice, and rightly so. You can be poetic and evocative in deep POV—even an illiterate character can think in lovely if broken prose—but it's not, at base, YOUR voice (if it is your voice, you're not really doing deep POV). It's not supposed to be. And if you want to write in your own voice, if you think the reader will get more from "hearing" you, well, why not? **The whole point of writing is to create an experience for the reader, and creating an interesting or lovely experience is a valid aim.**

POV approach also connects to your worldview. Now no one else agrees with me on this, so take it with a grain of salt. But I think your natural POV might reflect your understanding of reality. Hey, give me a chance! Let's say that you think that there is an absolute reality, but it's not necessarily knowable by most of us. That worldview is the one expressed by omniscient POV—the "godlike narrator" knows everything, within and without the characters, and knows more than all the characters together.



But maybe you think there's no absolute reality, and that the only way to get close to knowing reality is to juxtapose the accounts of several people, a collage-like effect that is very similar to multiple POV. Now we single-POV types, we don't know if there's an absolute reality, and in fact, we don't much care. We're mostly concerned with the inner reality of characters, what they think and notice and value.

Well, you know, if you have one of those worldviews, your story choice and your POV choice will probably reflect that. And that's good. It takes all kinds. That's why we have several POV approaches, several genres, and many writers. There isn't just one worldview out there, so there shouldn't be only one POV approach. And you should at least start with the one that lets you express your worldview and voice, and—you didn't really think I was going to say, "Anything goes," did you?—refine it and reinvent it and revise it so that **your writing is the best possible proof that your POV approach is right.**

No, you won't get it right the first time. Yes, you still must revise to make sure that your reader will experience what you want her to experience. But making your story and voice work well is plenty hard enough without adding in the pain of trying to write in a way that doesn't feel right to you.

## B) Deep POV is not right for every genre.

Most genres and sub-genres have their own preferred POV approach. Private-eye stories are usually in first-person. Mysteries are usually in some form of omniscient. Romances are usually in single-third POV. General (mainstream) fiction is often in either multiple or first person. **The preferred POV reflects something about how the genre works**—the mystery is about the mystery, not particularly about the character of the sleuth, so omniscient works well (as it does in many plot-driven stories).

Private-eye novels, on the other hand, are indeed about the character of the detective (and the detective's voice), so that snarky first-person narration allows that. The genres evolved a preferred POV approach because that approach usually (never say always 😊) allows writers to create the experience for the reader which is desired in that genre (chills and fear in the thriller, thoughtfulness in the mystery, etc.).



You are likely to be drawn to the POV approach and/or the genre which feel right to you, which explore the themes and issues that are most important to you. So trust tradition. You can innovate if you understand WHY the horror novel is usually in single POV or sf/f is often in omniscient. The preferred POV approach usually helps **create the desired experiences of that genre**. So that's a good place to start. And for most genres, deep POV is not the default (third person, at least—first-person can be pretty deep too).

## C) Deep POV is not right for many stories.

Many stories would be pretty much unwriteable in deep POV. Plot-driven books, where information must be conveyed which the main character doesn't have and action must be shown that the main character doesn't witness, are usually told in a form of omniscient POV. Sweeping epics where

worldbuilding or setting description are essential are better from omniscient too. Books where you are using an unreliable narrator are better from first-person.

Even tightly-focused character books can often be better-handled in a single-third person where your voice dominates. Dialogue-heavy books often benefit from the contrast of the conversational quality of the dialogue and the more formal quality of an omniscient or third-person narration. Stories with several major characters and a fast pace will often sound more coherent with multiple point of view. Comedy, which relies so much on the author voice, is usually in an omniscient ironic viewpoint.

That is, **never feel pressured to write deep POV**. It is not the only or best viewpoint approach. It's only best if it's right for you, the genre, and the story. Otherwise, try out the more traditional approaches and find the one that fits best.

### About the author

Alicia Rasley is a nationally known writing workshop leader and the author of *The Power of Point of View*, a Writer's Digest book. Her website, [www.rasley.com](http://www.rasley.com), and blog ([edittorrent.blogspot.com](http://edittorrent.blogspot.com)) have much free advice for writers.

## **Bonus Features**

As promised, this PDF features a few more resources on how to do deep POV. I came across two fantastic tutorials on deep POV. We know that deep POV is not always right for a story, and two authors can do fantastic deep POV in very different ways—so it's good to experiment with a variety of techniques in your writing to help you find the POV level you're most comfortable with, and the one that's right for your story.

Both of these are series done in forums (and for some reason, they both happen to be for romance authors, but the principles apply across the board).

- RomanceDivas—[Head Games: Writing Deep POV for Maximum Impact with Award-winning Author Linnea Sinclair](#). In addition to lessons, Linnea personally critiques several members' efforts to get deeper into their characters' heads. (Requires registration to read.)
- Coffee Time Romance & More—[Getting into Deep Point of View: Why It's Important for You and Your Readers with Editor Laurie Sanders](#). Laurie offers a number of exercises, lessons and critiques on how to do deep POV.
- Multi-published author Kaye Dacus also has a [great blog series on POV](#).

## **Conclusion**

I hope this booklet helps you understand the techniques authors use to create deep POV—and know when *not* to! Getting your readers inside your characters' heads can be a powerful storytelling technique to create good, memorable fiction.

Good luck!

*Previous guides:*

[Creating Character Sympathy](#)