

THE FOUR FACETS OF FICTION By Mike Klaassen

A gemstone or a prism may be viewed from its various sides or *facets*. To fully understand the craft of writing, we need to look at the four facets of fiction: (1) the author, (2) the narrator, (3) the point-of-view character, and (4) the reader.

- *Author*: the creator, doing the brainwork, making decisions, writing
- *Narrator*: a persona adopted by the author to tell the story, much like an actor adopts a personality for each role he plays
- *Point-of-view character*: a character selected by the author, from whose consciousness the narrator perceives the events of the story and relates them to the reader
- *Reader*: the intended audience, a participant reacting to and interpreting the presentation

This four-sided view of storytelling dates back to the earliest storytellers—prehistoric men and women. Imagine a cave dweller, let's call him Harry, recalling an adventure to his clansmen around a campfire. His first telling may have been a factual account of his success at hunting or an escape from disaster. But with retelling, as the woolly mammoth got bigger or the saber-toothed cat got faster, Harry's story probably entered the realm of fiction.

Even in this purest form of fiction, Harry's storytelling functioned on four levels.

- Harry acted as *author* by deciding which parts of the tale to emphasize and which to downplay or leave out.
- During the telling of the story, Harry became the *narrator*, assuming his storytelling persona, using the tone and style with which he wanted to communicate.
- Harry's first stories may have been about himself, related from his own perspective, using himself as the *point-of-view character*.
- If Harry had any sensitivity at all, he was conscious of his audience, his *readers*, and how they reacted, not only to the story but to the way he told it.

Even though the craft of storytelling has progressed a lot since the time of cavemen, it still integrates these four views. Their precise definition becomes part of our common language for understanding, explaining, and learning the craft of writing fiction.

Quite likely, the concept of four views of storytelling has you asking some questions. For example, aren't the author and the narrator the same? No.

- The *author* chooses words to build sentences and makes decisions for bringing plot, character, setting, and theme to life.
- The *author* chooses (consciously or subconsciously) and develops the *narrator*, an assumed persona to tell the story.

- The *author* establishes and maintains the *narrator's* tone and style, much like a ventriloquist controlling a dummy.
- The *author* functions as the brain and scribe of storytelling, while the *narrator* works like a mouthpiece, even if the story is written.

Every written story has both an *author* and a *narrator*.[\[1\]](#)

Another likely question is “Can’t the author become his own narrator and thus become one with the narrator?” The answer to that question is also no. An author is a living human, with all the wonders and faults that implies. A narrator of written fiction exists only on the page and in the mind of the author and reader. No matter how hard an author tries to eliminate the narrator by telling the story himself, he inadvertently creates an artificial narrator by the words and syntax he chooses. The very act of putting a story on the written page creates a narrator, and that narrator is not the human being we call the author.

Can the narrator and a point-of-view character be the same? The answer to that question is no, but let’s take a closer look at why. When deciding how to narrate the story, the author has two fundamental choices: (1) narrate from the viewpoint of a persona that is not a character (Once upon a time, in a kingdom far, far away . . .) or (2) narrate from the viewpoint of a character (He watched the snake slither toward him). A character represents a complex human, with a river of information flowing through his mind each minute. One of the author’s primary jobs is to decide which data the narrator communicates to the reader. If for no other reason, this selection of thoughts, senses, and feelings distinguishes the character from the narrator.

The role of reader is no simple concept, either. For the most part, the reader reacts to the story as it is being told. Once the reader recognizes the story’s patterns and conventions, however, he may begin to anticipate how the story might unfold (reacting to the story before it has been fully communicated). The reader might also have a delayed reaction to the storytelling. For example, the reader’s recalling information revealed in a previous chapter and then wondering if that information was meant to prepare him for an upcoming event (i.e., *foreshadowing*) or to create a distraction (a *red herring*). An author depends on the reader to understand the conventions of written fiction.

The relationships between author, narrator, point-of-view character, and reader—the four facets of fiction—are keys to understanding the craft of writing.

LEARN MORE

Mike Klaassen is the author of *Third-Person Possessed: How to Write Page-Turning Fiction for 21st Century Readers*, which is available for order at traditional and online bookstores. You may "Look Inside" the eBook edition at Amazon.com.

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[\[i\]](#) Card, *Characters and Viewpoint*, 140.