



POV for Romance Writers

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WELCOME

Point of view is an incredibly important storytelling element. Sometimes tricky to navigate, it requires curiosity and careful attention during both story planning and revisions.


This booklet lays out the big picture of what POV is, then dives into how it functions in modern romance fiction.

Happy reading!



WHAT'S POV?


NARRATION AND FOCALIZATION



When we talk about point of view (POV), we're actually discussing two overlapping but different things: **narration** and **focalization**.

Narration is “Who speaks?” Who’s telling the story? Whose voice are we hearing? If the answer is a character in the story, we have first-person narration, and we’re probably going to see a lot of the first-person pronouns *I*, *me*, *my*, and so forth. If “the narrator” is telling the story—if we are hearing a voice that doesn’t belong to a character—that’s third-person narration.

Focalization is “Who experiences?” Who sees, hears, notices, perceives, knows? Through what consciousness is the story focused or filtered? This is a term from a scholarly field called narratology—the study of structure in narratives or storytelling—and although the actual word doesn’t matter much, the concept sure does.



Narration can be focalized through one particular character, or several in turn, or not focalized through a character at all. We're not going to see that last one in romance, though, because we've got to experience the characters' thoughts, emotions, and sensations! This is, after all, a genre that runs on love, desire, and internal barriers.

Narration can be focalized in a relatively surface level way—maybe we only know what one character knows, but we're not immersed in their sensations and emotions—or very deeply and intimately, as though the narrator is channeling this character in an embodied way. Or somewhere in between.

If you're writing fiction, you almost certainly know whether you're using first- or third-person *narration*. But you may not have as much vocabulary to talk and think deeply about how you're using *focalization*, the other key component of POV.

Both of these dynamics affect narrative voice and can be noodled with to achieve various effects for readers.



ROMANCE CONVENTIONS

READER EXPECTATIONS



In romance fiction today, we most typically see this approach:

The story is told in third person. The storytelling voice is not one of the characters: “She ate the cherry slowly,” not “I ate the cherry slowly.”

Each romantic lead, and no one else, is a POV character. If two main characters are falling in love, we have two POV characters. If it’s a triad or other poly situation, we have the corresponding number.

It takes a limited, and relatively “deep” or “close,” POV. In some cases, the POV may be so deep that it feels like we’re experiencing the story from inside the character—but that can and probably should vary from scene to scene. Regardless of the level of immediacy (discussed more below), in this type of storytelling, the narrative voice is limited to knowing, noticing, and feeling only what our current POV character knows, notices, and feels.

If we’re in the cherry-eating character’s POV, we cannot have “She ate the cherry slowly, lost in the sweet-tart flavors on her tongue. Alex stared and hoped she wouldn’t notice.” Our POV character can’t know Alex’s unspoken wishes, so neither can we. We also can’t have “Lost in the sweet-tart flavors on her tongue, she didn’t notice the notification on her phone”: if our POV character doesn’t know about the text message waiting for her, neither do we.



WRITING DUAL THIRD PERSON

TIPS AND CONSIDERATIONS



Make each POV distinct.

We should be able to feel which character's POV we're in, because the narrative voice should be infused with the character's particular sensibilities, emotional style, distance or openness, ways of thinking about and seeing the world, and perhaps even vocabulary.

What would this character notice about this interaction, this setting, the person they're with?

How would they experience and perceive the scene?

What's it like for them to be in their body and in the world, in general and right now?

Let all that shine through in the storytelling when they're the POV character: when the scene is being focused or filtered through them.




Increase depth and intimacy of POV, especially when it really counts.

How deep or close the POV is often varies within a story. It makes sense to give readers a lot of immediacy at emotionally intense moments and turning points.

And if one or more main characters feels a little distant, inaccessible, uninteresting, or vague in a draft, it's a good idea to try increasing the intimacy of the POV approach throughout (or when we're in the problem character's POV).

We can go deeper into a particular character's POV by including sensory information (what does the character see, hear, feel, smell, taste? what do their emotions feel like in their body?). We can lean harder into that particular character's voice, vocabulary, and ways of experiencing the world. We can also increase depth by removing little elements of text that create distance.



Let's go back to that tasty cherry, with a few versions of the same sentences.

Elise ate the cherry slowly. Alex was watching, she reflected; she wondered what they saw when they looked at her.

Elise ate the cherry slowly. She knew Alex was watching, and wondered what they saw when they looked at her.

She ate the cherry slowly, lost in the sweet-tart flavors on her tongue. Alex stood by the door, watching from under those absurd bangs. What did they see when they looked at her?

These are all limited to what the POV character knows and feels (= close third person focalized through Elise). However, the first version leaves the most distance between reader and character, while the third version provides the most immediacy and depth.

Adding sensory details, eliminating tags like “she reflected,” shifting from a summary of what someone wonders to the question form, and avoiding the character’s name (we don’t typically think of ourselves by name, and *Elise* is more obtrusive than *she*) are all ways to move deeper into a POV if and when that seems useful for the story.




Choose and move between POVs with skill.

Which POV should you use for which scene? And when should you switch to a different POV character?

Reasonably balanced air time for the various POV characters is important. A big unintended disparity—where we're in one character's POV way less—probably points to underlying issues in the manuscript. If that's happening, it's wise to think about that character's development and arc, as well as the romance barrier and its resolution. But, of course, the idea is not to switch scenes mechanically by word count!

Instead, consider these questions:



Who has the most at stake in this scene? Who has the most to lose, or to gain? This is the key question, because that's usually the most effective perspective to take.

Who's having the biggest emotional experience?

Is anyone having a breakthrough in understanding...or failing to have one?

Is there anything you don't want readers to know yet, for purposes of suspense and tension? That's harder to accomplish when the character who knows the secret is our POV character.

Is there anything you *do* want readers to know or notice at this point? Perhaps we need character A's POV so we can see how wrong character B is, in order to create readerly cringing, amusement, or anticipation...and an urgent desire to get to the bit where the characters learn what we already know. Or perhaps a less-informed character can give readers needed context through what they notice about their surroundings or the new characters we're encountering together.

Watch out for POV slips, especially as you revise.

Very commonly, information—memories, perceptions, interpretations, sensations, emotions—that our POV character *doesn't have access to* slips into the narrative. Ask yourself: How do they know that? How can they tell? Did they actually see that? And the follow-up question: Will readers understand how the character knows?

Also watch out for head-hopping, which means bopping about between different POV characters in rapid succession or such that readers aren't sure whose head we're in. It's generally best to switch POV at chapter breaks or scene breaks only. This is the most familiar convention for readers, and by far the easiest approach to pull off effectively.

A scene break usually occurs at each point where the narrative jumps in **location, time, or POV character**. Scene breaks can be marked with an extra line space (often without indenting the first paragraph of the new scene, so that the gap is visually obvious even if it falls on a page break) or that extra space with a symbol or symbols such as *** or ###, perhaps transformed into something fancier or more resonant for the story's mood in the book design stage.



DIFFERENT APPROACHES


FIRST PERSON, SINGLE POV, ADDITIONAL POV CHARACTERS



Dual third person may be a familiar approach in romance fiction, but it is certainly not the only one that works!

Plenty of romance novels are written in first-person narration. Almost all of the skills and concerns discussed above apply here too:

- Just like third-person narratives, first-person ones can take a single POV or alternate among the perspectives of the romantic leads, generally switching chapter by chapter.
- Different narrators should have distinct voices. Perspective shifts should be purposeful and clear, serving the story. If there's only one narrator, that should be for a reason (see next page), and their voice should feel compelling and believable.
- In the first person, as in close third, we can only know, notice, and feel what our current POV character knows, notices, and feels. It's important to look out for POV slips during revisions.
- First-person narration can feel more or less intimate and immediate in different scenes or different stories, and that variation can help a writer create particular emotional effects.



Some romances offer only one character's POV, whether in first or third person. (Alexis Hall's *Boyfriend Material* is an example of a first-person, single-POV romance novel.) Because romance readers often want to see all the romantic leads' perspectives and insides, it's wise to think about *why* you're considering a single-POV approach.

Maybe the non-POV character knows the solution to the mystery or is, I dunno, secretly a ghost or immortal or whatever—and if readers know that too soon, you won't be able to create some particular emotional experience (a twist near the end, a shock of betrayal, or the like).

Or maybe it feels like there's not much to gain by showing readers a particular character's POV. If that's the case in a romance story, it's important to wonder: Do that character's arc, motivations, goals, wounds, misapprehensions, and role in the romance plot need work?

Occasionally, a romance novel includes *more* POV characters than just the romantic leads. Sometimes the characters involved in a secondary romance get to be POV characters too, with less screen time than the romantic leads of the main plot (Courtney Milan's *The Heiress Effect* is one example). We might also see the story through the perspectives of characters who aren't falling in love—a villain, a friend who's sequel bait, and so on—but we should always ask: How does this shift away from the romantic leads' perspectives serve the core romance plot?

WRAPPING UP

Romance is a genre that really gets into characters' (and readers'!) insides, their emotions, wants, needs, fears, wrong ideas, and ability to grow. Romance fiction relies on internal conflicts and barriers as well as external ones. And it requires letting readers get intimately close to characters, so that we care enough to root for them and their relationship.

It's helpful to understand the conventions around POV and its technical aspects. But at the end of the day, as with any aspect of craft, the real question is whether a particular approach to point of view *works for this particular story*. What do readers need to know and experience in order for the story and its tension, pacing, and emotional elements to work most powerfully? Be purposeful, be consistent, and let your characters' hard-won love create incredible experiences for readers.

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