

# How To Write Time and First Person

written by Holly

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When you're writing in the third person, you're generally doing it in the past tense. *Wagner ran to the store and picked up a carton of milk, three boxes of lime Jell-o, and a box of rat poison.* And the issue of when the story is being told doesn't really come into play. It happened at some point in the past, and it involves Those People. Fine.

Writing in the first person and keeping track of story time is another kettle of fish, and one that, like the soup presented to me when I was a kid in Alaska once, contains things like eyeballs. And fish heads. It can get pretty messy. (And disturbing, to stretch an already icky analogy to the breaking point, but I have been dying to use that fish-head soup for something since I was nine years old, and the time has come.)

First person is what I'm writing right now. I'm talking directly to you, and because this is a technical article, and it concerns what I'm doing right now, it's in the present tense. It's my present when I write it, and it will be your present when you read it, so we have a nice immediacy there that would be hard to duplicate in any other way.

But what if the "I" you're reading is the "I" of a character's voice? When is that "I" talking?

For short stories, probably once the story is over. *This horrible thing happened to me, and here is how it happened, and here is how I survived.* Survival is a foregone conclusion because the person telling the story is... well... telling the story. Unless he's telling it as a ghost (and that has been

done, and well) he's alive. But even if he is telling it as a ghost, some part of the narrator has survived.

Novels become a bit trickier. I've just finished up the first fourth of the novel **Talyn**, and I'm having to keep the narrator's time clearly in mind. The book is epic in scope and scale... and size. It will be 1200 pages long in finished form, and if I were to have Talyn narrate the book from the end of it, she would have to have an even, rather omniscient view. She would know how it all turned out before she even started telling the story, and in order to make her an unreliable narrator, I would have to make her a liar. Talyn is brutally, bluntly, embarrassingly honest. That wouldn't work. So as she starts telling us what is happening at the beginning of the story, she cannot yet know the twists and turns she is going to have to survive to make it to the end.

And this is where time comes in. How much time has passed for her when she starts telling us about what has happened?

I did not want to have her narrating events in the present tense because, frankly, I think twelve-hundred pages of ***"I look around me, sword in hand, and realize that I can't identify a single face in the crowd,"*** would drive me bonkers as a writer. I hate to think what it would do to a reader. So I had to have some lapse between when events happened and when Talyn told of them. I decided that the shortest amount of time that could pass from when an event happened to when she talked about it would be enough time for her to reach a place where she could reasonably sit down and talk to someone about it. The person she's talking to is you, of course, but she's had at least a couple of minutes to get away from the action and catch her breath. That way dialogue will still be fresh in her head and she can be expected to report it with reasonable accuracy, details of scenes will still be crisp, and she will still be carrying enough emotion from the events that just occurred react emotionally to them without looking like a nutjob. I'm using this time reference for scenes that are

personal and small in scope and close-in – arguments and sex scenes and events that move the plot forward in little increments.

The longest time between an event happening and Talyn reporting it, I decided, would be several months. That way, when sweeping, impersonal events take place that require a bit of distance so that both narrator and reader can see them clearly, Talyn can compress those events into a few concise paragraphs without us having to live through the tedium of months of plotless extra with her.

But that's as far as I'll let her wander. Talyn can only move through her story's universe in small to medium steps. With any gap longer than about three to four months, she doesn't know about it because in her time, it won't have happened yet.

By keeping her steps small and her time limited, Talyn can take the reader along with her as she moves through her life, and the reader does not know more about what is happening to her than she does most of the time. At intervals, I do drop into third person and into the head of one of several secondary point-of-view characters whose lives will intersect with Talyn's. This has the effect of permitting the reader to occasionally get an idea that a collision is coming before the narrator does, without the narrator looking like an idiot for not having seen it coming, too. Fun for suspense, doesn't mess up Talyn's voice.

So. How do you decide on a time reference for your first person narrator's voice?

## **Here are a few questions to help you figure out when your character is telling his story:**

### **1. Does your narrator change in the story?**

Sometimes the narrator is the person witnessing changes,

but does not change much himself. In that case, he can know the whole story when he starts telling it; his change will only be an incidental part of what happens, and will not have to be shown incrementally over time.

- 2. If yes, how much does your narrator change? In the holding of a single opinion? By one big trait? Does almost everything your character holds true fall away, leaving him almost a new person?**

If the narrator changes only a little – only in one way, then again, his change can be shown by simply showing how he acts at the beginning and how he acts at the end. For a single change, we do not really have to hear his voice stating facts or beliefs that he will later discover are wrong or that he will later put aside. We will not have to have him crash into walls and bloody his nose in front of us because he is wrong but believes he is right.

For stories that cover more change than a single personality point, however – for fundamental changes in the characters very being – we need a shortened time reference so that he can first be wrong while presenting the world to us as his truth, and then can discover, while we're with him, that he's wrong, and can then go about rebuilding himself based on new evidence. The more the character will change, the tighter your time reference needs to be.

- 3. What period of time does your story cover? An hour? A day? A year? A lifetime?** It's easier to allow a character to know the ending of a story while telling the beginning (and not fall into the tedium of "I remember back when I was a child, and we had to walk through the snow in our bare feet to get to school ...") If you're covering extensive ground, and you don't want to spend a great deal of time in what is, to your character, reminiscence about ancient history, shorten his time

reference.

4. **How much of what happens does your narrator need to NOT know as he's telling his tale, and do you have any means besides limiting his time reference to keep him from knowing it? Does he, for example, have amnesia? Alcoholic blackouts? Multiple personalities?**

The first part of this is going to be answered by what an evil person you are. Are you planning all sorts of nasty surprises for your poor lead? If so, you'll want a short time reference so the reader can have the fun of watching your character step into your carefully placed tiger traps and blow up your landmines. Is your character telling a sweet story about his odd relatives and their bizarre behavior? A longer time reference will do just fine, no matter how long the book is or how much time it covers. And if you're doing a novel that requires suspense but you have handicapped your narrator in some way, either by selective removal of memories or by some other method of keeping information from him, you can afford a longer time reference if you want one – by virtue of your manipulation of his abilities to narrate honestly, you've giving yourself an out on maintaining suspense.

5. **Do you have other means besides the narrator's voice for conveying essential story information? For example, can you make use of clips from letters or diaries, televised news, newspaper articles, or other external sources that the character can read? Can you place any portion of your story in another character's head or another point of view?**

If you have alternative means of relaying essential backstory, you can shorten your character's time reference down to right here, right now. You can also use the immediacy of a very short time reference to allow your character to discover a world that is new to both him and the reader.

Time is an essential part of any story, but with stories told in the first person, it takes on unique characteristics as a gatekeeper of knowledge and the controller of suspense. If you're writing in the first person, take the time to think about time.

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**NOTE:** Want much, much more on how to build better characters? To learn a Shadow Room exercise that invites the right character for your story to show up, do good character interviews that will bring your characters to life while writing them, and master the process of committing the Sins of Characterization well, see Holly Lisle's Create a Character Clinic.

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