

### **The Construct**

Welcome to the Construct. If you're wondering, "what is the Construct?" then let me simply add say that it's everything when it comes to creating a story. You see, unlike the real world, where objects are fixed in a particular space and rules are unbreakable, the Construct is what you make it. Think of the Construct as the imaginary playground of your mind, put down on paper. And, like its root word "co," which means together and "struct," which means "to build," suggest, the Construct is your words on paper that are put together in the head of your reader.

At first thought, this might seem like a daunting, monumental task: if the reader is dependent upon you to create the story and carry it forward, what then should you put down on paper? Some authors, like JRR Tolkien, author of *The Lord of the Rings*, put pages and pages of great detail into describing the look of a particular tree or a river bank. Still, other authors like JK Rowling, author of the *Harry Potter* series, describe things in just enough detail to make sense for a young child, while still allowing the reader to fill in some necessary detail that's not directly stated.

So, back to our question: what should you put down on the paper? The answer is just as simply stated as the question: everything written down should serve some greater purpose. For example, if your character is walking down a street, it should say something about them, such as the way they walk, interact with other characters, or their physical description. This means that every line and word of your story should be purposeful. And, it also means that what you don't put down on paper should be assumed by the reader and left to their imagination alone. Don't believe me? How many books have you read where the main character uses a bathroom? Not many I'm sure. So, did Harry Potter really go seven years without using the bathroom? Of course not, but the reader just assumes that somewhere in between unlocking the mysteries of the Chamber of Secrets and defeating Voldemort, Harry used the bathroom. Your reader is more than capable of filling in details that are not directly stated by you, the author. This brings us to the next section on the power of your reader's imagination.

### **The Power of the Imagination**

Let's talk about imagination for just a moment. In writing, it's more powerful than you realize; you can make your reader imagine nearly anything. Don't believe me? Well, as you read this, try to not imagine a pink elephant with purple polka dots entering a room full of frantic midgets who, because of zero gravity, are suspended in midair as gently as a frozen snowflake.

Do you see my point? Whatever you put down on paper will be automatically translated in the head of your reader and put to life. Samuel Coleridge, a poet from the 1800s, called this "suspension of disbelief." This means that, for the moment, your brain will read a story and assume it is real. You might think this non-sense; you know that a story isn't real! Of course, in Coleridge's day, writing was the only medium for transmitting information outside of speaking. Today, we have radio, television, movies, etc. Just go

to a "romantic comedy" film and you'll see what I mean. Even though the audience knows the movie is fictional, they still cry their little hearts out when the main character gets her heart broken, or when two people fall in love. Why, you ask, if they know it's not real? Because of "suspension of disbelief"! With this great and awesome power at your disposal, you must make sure to use it wisely. Slips in grammar, tensing, or strange plot shifts all serve to remind the reader that what they are reading is fictional; your goal as a writer is to hold that "suspension" as long as possible.

I—and you as well—can probably remember a time reading a book when a grammatical error pops up out of nowhere. Perhaps it's a missing letter in a character's name or perhaps your character *shitted* instead of *shifted* on the ground. Funny yes, but it can be like a slap to the face, reminding you that what you are reading is just the work of some desperate author, huddled in their basement, typing furiously with one of those broken, noisy typewriters.

### **Point of View**

Before we begin writing our story, we'll need to settle on which point of view we wish to use. Each point of view has its own benefits and limitations. Let's take a look:

- 1<sup>st</sup> person point of view: Using "I" to narrate is the most basic form of telling a story. "I did this" or "I walked into a room and saw the most disgusting thing ever...my mom in pajamas" both use first person point of view. The biggest benefit to this point of view is that it allows for deep, personal thoughts. Its limitation is that it can be a biased viewpoint because it cannot see everything or narrate things happening beyond what the narrator can see. For example, if we say, "I walked into a room and saw her," how can we explain how *she* is feeling at that moment? We cannot since our narrator is a character in our story and is limited by his perspective. We would probably narrate something to the effect of, "I thought the look in her eyes was love for me alone." Is that really what *she's* thinking, or is she eyeing that cheeseburger behind our narrator?
- 2<sup>nd</sup> person point of view: Rarely used in professional fiction, this point of view is reserved for those "make your own ending" books because it relies on "you" to tell the story. "You did this" or "You walked into the room" sound good at first, but keep in mind that you're making your reader part of the story—which means bringing their biases and limitations into the story. If we have a handicapped reader and your story begins with, "You walked into the room," this might present an odd feeling to the story. Thus, stay away from this point of view unless you're trying to be purposefully cheesy.
- 3<sup>rd</sup> person point of view: The most common professional point of view uses character names and their pronouns (he, she, they, etc.)

to tell the story. "His name was McMurphy" is an example of 3<sup>rd</sup> person narration since McMurphy isn't the one telling the story—it's someone else, either another character or perhaps not. The biggest benefit of using this type of narration is that your narrator is not limited by a single character; they can see and be everywhere at once, if you wish them to be. They can narrate the thoughts of the boy *and* the girl to reveal their innermost secrets. There are, however, three different kinds of 3<sup>rd</sup> person you can utilize, depending on what you want your reader to know about your characters:

- o Objective: Your narrator gives the facts of the narrative in the most neutral way possible. Think of this narrator like a reporter who gives the facts of what happened and leaves personal judgment aside: "At 2:00 on a Tuesday evening, Harry Potter walked down the street in a depressed manner."
- o Subjective / Limited / Biased: Your narrator does not have to give away every detail, which is what a subjective / limited 3<sup>rd</sup> person point of view does. Most subjective points of view are told from a particular character, who witnesses the story, but does not know or see everything: "At 2:00 on Tuesday, Harry Potter walked down the road, deep in thought, pondering something deep in his mind. What that thing was, one cannot say."
- o Omniscient (God mode): Your narrator, much like Jesus, can sit in the high heavens of your story world and see, know, and explain every character and situation that occurs. For example: "Little did Harry Potter know that as he walked down the road, a car was about to strike him dead." The "little did he know" part there tells you that the narrator knows something the main character does not know, which makes the narrator more powerful than the character. This can get annoying of course, especially if the narrator gives away *everything* and leaves nothing for the reader to imagine.

At this point, I usually get *that* question: which point of view is the best? The answer is not simple; some are good at 1<sup>st</sup>, while others are good at 3<sup>rd</sup> person. After practicing with different points of view, you'll most likely settle on a particular style for you. Personally, I find 1<sup>st</sup> person to be the easiest when I'm being timed (on a test), while 3<sup>rd</sup> person is best for stories with no time limit (free writing at home). In the end, it's your choice.

### **The Story World**

Well, it's about high time we started to talk about what is affectionately called, "the story world." When you first begin writing a story, the reader will assume that the story takes place in a world—with rules and boundaries—much like our own, unless specified otherwise. Let's assume for a moment we

want to create a story about a man who works at a dead-end job or a forest that suddenly catches fire; do we really need a 1-page description about the type of world these stories take place in? Probably not, unless this forest is the last one in the year 3043 or that this man lives on an alien planet. Thus, let us stick to what *needs* to be written down for the reader to make sense of our story.

Using what's been previously said about point of view and the power of imagination, let's take a crack at creating a story world to see how things operate in 1<sup>st</sup> person point of view:

The green, vibrant trees dashed wildly in the breeze as the gazelles bountifully cascaded down the rich, ebullient landscape. This was a beautiful, peaceful forest, teeming with life and free from the harsh hands of man. As I walked into the entrance of this particular forest, I could hear the soft beats of the wings of hummingbirds flying by. The deeper I entered into this forest, the darker it became, until at last I came to an ebony-veiled cottage deep in the heart of these woods. I approached softly at first and then more boldly as I gained courage. Pushing the door to the cottage open at last, I saw a table set for two, complete with chairs and wooden silverware. On this table sat food of every kind. The smell of its richness flowed through my nose with its myriad of sweet and savory aromas. I knew this would be a feast to remember. But, as I slowly sank into the first empty chair, I couldn't help but wonder who would occupy that second, empty chair.

As we can see, I've set up my own little story world here. Did I speak about how gravity operated or how I walked with my feet? Did I mention the type of food on the table? No, because those things did not need to be said: they were filled in by the reader's background. What was important—namely my description of the forest—was what my narrator (in this case, me) described. And, believe it or not, writing is not any more complicated than what I've written above. Sure, you can be more descriptive or introduce additional characters, but remember that the world you create is for your control; add as much, or as little as you like. Now, let's try that same story, but told from 3<sup>rd</sup> person omniscient point of view, to see if we can spot some differences between them:

The green, vibrant trees dashed wildly in the breeze as the gazelles bountifully cascaded down the rich, ebullient landscape. This was a beautiful, peaceful forest, teeming with life and free from the harsh hands of man. As Mr. Hampton walked into the entrance of this particular forest, he could hear the soft beats of the wings of hummingbirds flying by. The deeper he entered into this forest, the darker it became, until at last he came to an ebony-veiled cottage deep in the heart of these woods. He approached softly at first and then more boldly as he gained courage. He pushed the door to the cottage open at last and saw a table set for two, complete with chairs and wooden silverware. On this table sat food of every kind. The smell of its richness flowed through his nose with its myriad of sweet and

savory aromas. He thought that this would be a feast to remember. But, as he slowly sank into the first empty chair, Mr. Hampton couldn't help but wonder who would occupy that second, empty chair.

At first, you might just think that 3<sup>rd</sup> person point of view is about changing every "I" to a "he" or "she." Although in this example it would seem a rule, once additional characters arrive and start speaking, the differences between 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> person really begin to shine.

### Characters and Their Dialogue

The last section of this introduction guide is about the role characters play in a story and how to craft meaningful, vibrant dialogue. To begin, characters are those people/animals/objects in your story that *do* something. So, do you really need characters in your story besides your narrator? No, as you probably learned earlier in the year while reading *There Will Come Soft Rains* (the crazy, talking house), but this will depend heavily on the prompt you are given on your exam, as some prompts are easier with a character and others are easier with just a narrator. As you learned earlier in the year, you have two choices when it comes to describing your characters:

- Directly: You explain the traits/thoughts of that character directly. For example, "James was a very nervous individual."
- Indirectly: You hint/suggest the traits/thoughts of that character indirectly through your descriptions. For example, "James bit his fingers and was sweating profusely." This suggests James was nervous, but in a more descriptive way.

The better, more experienced writer will always choose indirect, but in a pinch direct characterization can work as well, as long as the character is being described in some way. Keep in mind that characters should be treated as unique beings in your story and should be described as much as possible in your story. Of course, if you have more than one character in your story, you're going to run into the pesky problem of dialogue, which literally means, "speech exchange" across more than one character. Dialogue can serve many functions, but mostly it explains the speech given from one character to another. Using dialogue invariably leads to the use of quotation marks, which are ALWAYS necessary. For example:

"I went to the movies the other day."  
"Was it any good?"

You'll probably quickly figure out that in this dialogue set there are two people talking, unless the narrator is insane. But, to make things easier for the reader, we must begin using "dialogue tags," which include additional information for our dialogue. Let's take a look at some simple examples:

"I went to the movies the other day," he said.  
"Was it any good?" she said.

Notice we've established who is talking. Also notice the use of punctuation here: the only time we include a punctuation mark inside of a quotation is if it's a question (?) or an exclamation mark (!). If it's a period (.) we simply cap it off with a comma and connect to the dialogue tag, like this:

"I'm very tired," he whispered softly.

Even though "I'm very tired" is a complete sentence, we still end it with a comma, add a dialogue tag, and cap the whole thing off with a period to signify the end of our sentence.

Of course, dialogue tags can get more complicated, depending on how much information you wish to give. For example:

"I went to the movies the other day," he said excitedly as he scratched his beard with his gaunt fingernails.

"Was it any good?" she questioned, while thinking about someone else.

Notice here we've juiced things up a bit. Of course, there is a limit on how much information can be squeezed into a dialogue tag. When in doubt, ask yourself if the tag is giving information the reader *needs*. If the answer is yes, include it. If not, then it's not needed.

Additionally, as you write you'll probably wonder how internal speech, or thinking in the head of the narrator works. When your character is speaking in their own mind, you can use quotes or *italics*. With quotes, you must use a tag; with italics, none are necessary because it is assumed that the use of italics mean the speech is not aloud:

"I wonder where she could be," I thought to myself.  
*I wonder where she could be.*

Lastly, let's return to our *Story World* we created earlier to see how dialogue works in 1<sup>st</sup> person versus 3<sup>rd</sup> person point of view. We'll start with 1<sup>st</sup> person:

Suddenly, and inexplicably without warning, the door to the cottage blew open. As I looked frantically towards the front door, thinking an attack was possible, there she was: the most beautiful girl I had ever seen. Of course, not wanting to be caught with my mouth agape, I gave a frantic introduction:

"Who are you?" I stammered.

She smiled weakly, with a sudden look of worry on her pale face. "I don't know," she said as she coughed violently. "I've been walking these woods for hours and I don't know how I got here."

The look on her face puzzled me, but I could tell there was no malice behind her eyes, which in perfect blue, reminded me of the sea after a gentle storm.

"It's okay," I said, "come over by the fire and warm yourself a bit."

*Who was she? And, where did she come from?* Not satisfied with the answer in my mind, I could tell this day was turning into quite an adventure.

Notice the use of dialogue and tags in the story that help give the reader more information. Also, notice what I have and haven't said, such as the clothing on my visitor: so, is she naked, since I haven't mentioned it? Chances are that your mind filled in the clothes even though there is little mention of them. But, the color of her eyes is important to my story, so I took the time to describe them as much as possible. In your own stories, describe what is needed and leave the rest to the reader. But, before we get too far ahead of ourselves, let's take a look at this same story, told in 3<sup>rd</sup> person objective point of view:

Suddenly, and inexplicably without warning, the door to the cottage blew open. As Mr. Hampton looked frantically towards the front door, he thought an attack was possible, but instead there stood a young woman, clothed in white, silky fabric. At first glance, Mr. Hampton thought she was the most beautiful girl he had ever seen. Standing with his mouth agape, he gave a frantic introduction:

"Who are you?" he stammered.

She smiled weakly, with a sudden look of worry on her pale face. "I don't know," she said as she coughed violently. "I've been walking these woods for hours and I don't know how I got here."

The look on her face puzzled Mr. Hampton, but he could tell there was no malice behind her eyes, which in perfect blue, reminded him of the sea after a gentle storm.

"It's okay," he said finally. "Come over by the fire and warm yourself a bit."

"Who was she and where did she come from?" he wondered to himself. Not satisfied with the answer in his mind, Mr. Hampton could tell this day was turning into quite an adventure.

Notice it is not the story that has changed, but rather who the narrator is and what he sees. In our 1<sup>st</sup> person example, the narrator is me, Mr. Hampton. In the 3<sup>rd</sup> person example, the narrator is like an invisible, reporter ghost, who sees everything. If we were to further modify this to 3<sup>rd</sup> person omniscient (all knowing), we might give additional information on what the girl is feeling in the story, her thoughts, or even how she got to the cottage in the first place. The point is we could know things that the characters in the story do not know...if we choose to. Or, we could keep things simple and use first person with a single character from your story telling us "how it is." It's entirely up to you and your skill level!

**Final Thoughts**

And, that, my dear friends, is the power of writing fictional stories. As you write your own stories, use your creativity and feel free to experiment with as many styles as you can. And, when the story doesn't come to you automatically, don't forget the inspiring, immortal words of Kurt Vonnegut: "everyone can write: all it takes is time." Good luck!