



The Beacon

Your guiding light for writing and publishing

Number 33, Winter 2007-08

Point of View

Experts have written whole books on point of view (POV), so a short article is not going to do more than get you aware of this crucial topic and how it can affect your chances of getting published. For unpublished fiction writers, POV and voice must be mastered before submitting any story, anywhere. Editors have noses like bloodhounds when it comes to either and, if you waver, are likely to reject your work. Yes, POV and voice are that important. My writers' group has been dissecting both for a couple of weeks now and, using a simple test, I think I have, at last, got a small handle on POV.

Here's a test for third person narratives: read your paragraphs out loud while turning everything into first person. If you can't do it, you are introducing another's POV. We worked on excerpts from *The Da Vinci Code* by Dan Brown who slides around like ball-bearings. This test also works the other way round—turn your first person stories into third person. And, remember that, when using first person, the character cannot tell the reader what s/he looks like unless s/he is looking in a mirror. Editors do not recommend this device for solving your dilemma.

I also learned that it is fine to change POV but I must signal the reader by using the name of the new POV character at the beginning, and dividing the scene(s) from previous ones with an editorial space or *** in the middle of the page.

Voice enhances POV. Eileen Kernaghan defines voice as "the disguise you wear when you write." She tells us a third person narrator can also carry a "distinct persona," in addition to the POV character; for example, language from a previous era in a historical novel, or the vernacular from another country. Voice can be close and intimate as if the narrator is personally involved with the main character, or as distant as an impartial observer recalling an earlier event.

This is trickier than I would like! I have been going through my first five chapters of my juvenile novel checking out POV and voice separately. Next I'm inserting some of the language used in the 1890s. How do you check these key ingredients in your fiction?



From the editor's desk

I am new to fiction writing and find the craft challenging. It's not so much the storyline, the plot, or characterization that is troubling me. My most time-consuming concern is point of view (POV) and its integral side-kick, voice. I tend to slide out of POV during the creative process and then have difficulties in recognizing my errors in the revision phase. The lead article this month tackles the issue (with some trepidation!) and I look forward to hearing your tips for testing POV.

Joyce's piece (p.2) comes to grips with active and passive voice, a key indicator of the good writer.

The festive season is looming fast with its attendant expenditures and fatigue. I can live with the lack of dollars, but the fatigue diminishes my creativity. What to do? When the words won't come, I turn to my photos. I gain relaxation from editing them and enjoy the beauty in a few. This seems to help to crack open my creative channel again. I expect you have other ways to tickle your brain into action. Or, perhaps, you just wait out the season without writing at all. But I can't do that....

Enjoy the holidays and my best wishes for a very creative 2008.

Julie H. Ferguson

INSIDE THIS ISSUE

From the editor's desk	1
Point of View	1
Self-editing for Writers	2
Events for Writers	2



Be active—It's Good for Your Health

By Joyce Gram

The non-fiction guru William Zinsser says, "The difference between an active-verb style and a passive-verb style—in clarity and vigor—is the difference between life and death for a writer."

Life and death? Wow!

He goes on: "Verbs are the most important of all your tools. They push the sentence forward and give it momentum. Active verbs push hard; passive verbs tug fitfully." For example, "Joe saw him" (active) is strong. It's short and precise and leaves no doubt who did what. "He was seen by Joe" (passive) is weak. It's necessarily longer and has an insipid quality. It's also ambiguous: How often was he seen by Joe? Once? Every day? Once a week? A passive style, says Zinsser, will sap the reader's energy. Nobody ever quite knows what is being perpetrated by whom and on whom.¹

All the books on writing and style that I've read contain similar advice: the active voice is usually more direct and vigorous than the passive.² Every writer must learn to spot the passive. Invariably, a passive clause contains a *be*-verb (or *get*) plus a past participle (usually a verb ending in *ed*). "The deadline *was* missed by the student" and "My wallet *got* swiped" are passive constructions. "The student missed the deadline" and "Some low-life swiped my wallet" are active—and better.

But, hold on! There are good reasons to use the passive. Here are some: when the actor is unimportant or unknown; when you want to hide the actor's identity (maybe that's why the passive has become so common in business and political writing); when the focus of the sentence is on the thing being acted upon; when you want the punch word at the end of the sentence; and, my favourite, when the passive sounds better—which it sometimes does.³

Know what you're doing and choose well (and remember Zinsser: "life and death!").

¹ Zinsser, William. *On Writing Well: The Classic Guide to Writing Nonfiction*. 2006.

² Strunk, William, Jr., and E.B. White. *The Elements of Style*. 2000.

³ Garner, Bryan A. *Garner's Modern American Usage*. 2003

© Joyce Gram 2007

Contact Joyce Gram for all your editing needs: gramkend@shaw.ca

Winter/spring events for Writers

(for additions, visit www.beaconlit.com/schedule2008.htm regularly)

Feb 2 - Book Magic: Turning Writers into Published Authors (9am to noon) and **How to Craft Irresistible Query Letters** (1-4pm) for fiction and non-fiction writers who want to get published. VCC's downtown campus. \$53.00 each. Register [here](#).

Mar 8 - How to Craft Irresistible Query Letters that Get You Published for fiction and nonfiction writers who want to approach commercial book and magazine publishers with their work. Creative Writing Diploma Program, Johnston Heights Secondary School, Surrey, 9am-4pm. Register [here](#).

Apr 11-12 - Crafting Irresistible Query Letters that Get You Published (Sat. 11th, 1-4pm) for the **Powell River Festival of Writers**. Also find out your next steps for your article and book manuscripts in the Blue Pencil Café. Julie will be available for discussions about your work in progress and/or your writing career. Register [here](#).

Apr 19 - Writing with Power!! for emerging and experienced writers who want to revitalize their work. Creative Writing Diploma Program, Johnston Heights Secondary School, Surrey, 9am-noon. Register [here](#).

Self-editing for Writers

BLS resident editor, **Joyce Gram** is presenting *Self-editing for Writers* on Saturday, December 8th, 2008 for the Surrey Creative Writing Diploma Program at Johnson Heights Secondary School in Surrey, from 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. It's a bargain at \$69.00.

Learn how to look at your writing with fresh eyes. Whatever you write—fiction, non-fiction, business, or technical—this workshop will show you what an expert editor would do to perfect your manuscript. From the nitty-gritty of grammar, punctuation, and word usage to the fine art of voice, style, and plain language, participants will learn how to produce writing that is error-free and a pleasure to read.

You can register by phoning:
604.583.4040.

This is a MUST-ATTEND—to heck with Christmas shopping!

Please visit the Beacon blog at:
www.beaconlit.blogspot.com



The Beacon is published quarterly by Beacon Literary Services and is distributed electronically free of charge to those who are interested. If you do not wish to continue to receive the newsletter, please notify the editor:

Julie H. Ferguson
#5-300 Maude Road,
Port Moody, BC
Canada, V3H 2X6
P: (604)469-1319
F: (604)469-1316

info@beaconlit.com
www.beaconlit.com

© Beacon Literary Services 2007
All rights reserved