

Short story handy hints

Newent Community School

Year 11

16 April 2024

Cheryl Burman



cherylburman.com

Covering

- Session 1
 - Make every word count
 - Deep Point of View (POV)
 - Resist the urge to explain
 - Easy wins
 - Story endings
- Session 2
 - What works and doesn't work – group work
 - Q&A

Deep POV

- Deep POV (sometimes called close third)
 - An extension of Point of View, can be done in any POV except omniscient
- Benefits
 - Lose words ('he heard,' 'she saw', 'they wondered', 'she thought', 'he felt' etc)
 - Brings your reader closer to your character (while losing words)
- How do we do it?
 - As the writer, live that scene *as the character lives it, with **their** ears and eyes.*
 - Use the character's *voice* to add authenticity and depth to the character

Review quote: 'You ARE the character drowsing on the bus or shivering in the cold'

Not in Deep POV

Johnny wondered what the noise was outside. *It sounds like dogs fighting*, he thought, as he walked to the window to investigate. He twitched aside the curtain and peered into the moonlit darkness. He could see a pack of dogs leaping high around the base of a large tree. *Is there a cat stuck up there?* he asked himself. And then he noticed the tiny bundle huddled on the end of a branch. *I'll have to go outside and shoo the dogs away*, he decided, *see how brave those dogs really are when faced with cat's best friend.*

99 words

In Deep POV

A noise outside, like dogs fighting, drew Johnny to the window. He twitched aside the curtain to peer into the moonlit darkness. A pack of dogs leaped high around the base of a large tree. Johnny pressed his nose to the glass, searching. He groaned. A tiny furry bundle huddled on the end of a branch. Straightening his shoulders, Johnny marched to the door. How brave would those dogs be when faced with cat's best friend?

77 words

From one of my books

Not in Deep POV

Teddy is able to find a lift into Jindabyne in a returning supply truck on a bright Saturday morning. He plans to get new clothes, but he thinks he should perhaps visit the post office and send money to Raine. He wonders if this will mean revealing his whereabouts though, so he'll have to think about it.

In Deep POV (as it appears in the novel)

Teddy cadges a lift into Jindabyne in a returning supply truck on a bright Saturday morning. As well as getting new kit, he has a hazy idea he should visit the post office and send money to Raine – if it doesn't mean revealing his whereabouts.

The first is more formal, with a lot of 'telling'. It could be any character.

The second, with its use of words like 'cadges', 'hazy idea' and *showing* Teddy's concern rather than *telling* the reader he's worried, brings us inside Teddy's unique head to hear his thinking process.

Resist the urge to explain – let the reader work

- Examine every sentence for redundant words and phrases
 - Small things
 - ‘she had a big smile ON HER FACE’/‘he stood UP’/‘she sat DOWN’/nodded HIS HEAD ...
 - Try getting rid of ‘the’
 - **Ditch explanatory phrases – see example**
 - **Imply things**
 - eg a scene ending: The dragon came at dusk. It breathed white smoke. Red-gold flames flared against the darkening sky.

Explanatory phrases

Gweyr summoned a wry smile **[to show Da she was mostly joking]**. ‘Chicken soup, again?’ **[she said drily.]** If Mam was here, it would have been carrot soup today **[because Mam always made carrot soup on Wednesdays. She’d been doing so ever since Gweyr could remember]**. A too familiar lump rose in her throat **[at this reminder of her dead mother]**.

Da raised an eyebrow **[to show he understood Gweyr was thinking about her mother]** and tilted his head in the direction of the scullery **[telling her she needed to get back to work]**.

94 words vs 41

Easy wins which add huge value

- **Active tense vs passive - sharper**
- **Present tense - greater immediacy**
- **Lose dialogue tags** wherever possible
 - Use action beats - **bring your characters to life with habits, gestures**
 - Avoid using both, eg ‘....,’ he said, standing and tugging at his cuffs. Vs ‘...’ He stood, tugged at his cuffs.
- **Lose ‘weasel’ words** – qualifiers: likely, very, mostly, possibly, perhaps, really, seems
 - **And make your writing more assured**
- **Lose ‘that’**

Short story endings and RUE

- Readers love story endings which
 - **make them feel clever**
 - **get them thinking**
- This is not the same as leaving them confused.
- (And novel endings are a different ballgame!)

Short story endings (RUE) – the how

- Your story likely ends at least one sentence, and possibly one (or more) paragraphs before you think it does.
- We get to the end of the action and then explain to the reader what happened/or what happened afterwards.
- Ties the reader into just one – our own – interpretation of events OR patronises them

Finish your story at the point where the key action has happened
and
RESIST THE URGE TO EXPLAIN!

Other short story endings

- **The twist in the tale** ... humorous or dark, vague or specific – make them smile or gasp
- **Circularity** ... bring your story back to the beginning (setting, statement/question, action)
- **Hope** ... leave your readers positive, whatever has gone before
- **Anticipation** ... there is more to come

Session 2

Examples and discussion

Look for – (find examples)

- Where/how is the writing succinct?
- Where does the reader have to work? Does it confuse or add?
- What sort of ending do we have? Does it work?
- How has the writer shown us character?
- How has the pacing driven the story? (Fast, deliberate ...)
- What else do you see? Pluses and minuses.