

# The Writer's Workshop (Part 3 of 6): Write Your First Book



by [John Wasowicz](#)

## Finding your voice

As a writer, it's important to decide which perspective you will use to write your book. Are you going to write in the first, second, or third person? Is one better than the other to communicate what you want to say? Which type of [narrative](#) best fits your style?

### First person narrative is familiar and powerful

Here is an example of a first-person [account](#) followed by a brief description.

**1st Person.** *Cooking is my passion. Ever since I was young, I enjoyed working in the kitchen. It's my "office." Pots, toasters, and spices are my tools; skillets and pans are the canvases for my culinary creations.*

"First person" conveys familiarity. It provides an intimate, personable account of the story. Think of times someone shared a memory with you. Perhaps it was a trip they took to an exotic destination or a special event in their life, such as the birth of a child or grandchild. Or perhaps it was a disaster, such as a recollection of the terrible storms that ripped through much of the nation earlier this year.

A first-person narrative is powerful. For example, "I was never so scared in my entire life. I honestly believed it might be the end for me." Or "It was the most important moment in my life. I never experienced such a personally rewarding event."

These sentences connect with the audience. They draw you into the story, forge an intimate relationship between you and the narrator, and allow you to think about similar moments in your own life. A first-person narrative *shares* the story between writer and reader. It's just the two of you.

A first-person narrative is not used exclusively for autobiographies. Many works of fiction employ this writing style. Writers from Mark Twain to F. Scott Fitzgerald to Sue Grafton use it. It works in both fiction and nonfiction. If you want to build a special bond with your audience, use the first person.

### **Second person narrative is instructive and impersonal**

Here's an example of a presentation in the second person and a discussion about its use.

**2nd Person.** *You might consider cooking as a hobby. Even if the only thing you know how to do is fry an egg, you can become an accomplished chef in a short period of time. And you can eat the fruits of your labor!*

"Second person" conveys instruction. A book on subjects as diverse as car repair to meditation are typically written in a second-person narrative. Whether you're attempting to fix a clogged drain or apply mascara, the instructions you receive are going to tell you what to do and how to do it.

That doesn't mean that second person is necessarily impersonal. In fact, many "how to" instructions are incredibly personal. Maybe it's the first time you're trying to do something or perhaps you're looking for tips about things you already do. In either case, these instructions are important to you. Second person is hands-on and requires — demands — your personal engagement. "How to" eliminate a conviction on your record. "How to" get a divorce. "How to" invest your money. All of these topics are extremely personal.

Writing in the second person conveys the voice of experience. It offers a solution. It's the end of the journey, not the beginning. Once you follow the instructions, you can go about your business and get it done.



**Third person narrative is the most common form of writing**  
Finally, let's look at third person.

**3rd person.** *He stepped into the kitchen and stirred the dish that had been simmering for the past hour. Raising the wooden spoon to his mouth, he tasted the soup. It needed something, he decided, as he reached for the spice rack.*

Most stories are told in the third person, based upon observation. Third person is a journalistic style, intended to be objective and enable the reader to observe the story. It's similar to watching a movie.

The third person narrative can be personal or impersonal, depending on the text used to describe the scene. There's a difference between "She walked along the beach" and "She dipped her toes in the cold water as she walked along the beach, a warm breeze caressing her cheeks."

Third person also provides greater versatility in writing. You choose how much detail to provide about people, scenery, emotions, and history.

The third person is the safest form of writing. You are more apt to show your personal preferences and biases when you write in the first person, and you show off your expertise when you write in the second person. If the third person, by comparison, you have more control over which preferences and biases you want to share with the reader.

### **Which "person" are you?**

The 'person' in which you tell your story affects the tone and substance of your tale. As described above, a story is be more personal, instructive, or objective based upon how the story is told.

So which person are you? To find out, I suggest you play with the choices, like colors on a palate. Try out different voices. Experiment. Don't assume you want to write in the first, second or third person. You might surprise yourself. How often did you go online or walk into a store to purchase something that you never expected to buy? Immerse yourself in the process to see what works best for you.

Ultimately, however, it comes down to personal style. After all, it's your voice. Do you want something personable? Is your preference to sound professorial? Are you most comfortable looking at things from a distance and writing in the third person? In the end, that will determine the "person" you use to convey your story.

## **A little secret: You can be all three!**

As you write in different persons, consider combining all three. Many authors do so. Some authors combine first and third person narratives, similar to the style of Thomas Boswell writing about Samuel Johnson or the imaginary Dr. Watson talking about Sherlock Holmes. Other authors alternate chapters in the first and third person, enabling the reader to identify the main character and to distinguish between plot and subplot.

Combining ‘persons’ is an effective tool to pull in the reader, create a one-on-one narrative, and then tell a story using a third person narrative. Artfully done, the reader may never realize that the ‘person’ shifts in the story.

My books are all in the third person. But I employ a variety of tricks — using personal recollections of past [events](#); adding diary entries and phone messages; and adding reference material — that allow me to use first and second person accounts in the course of the book.

If you’re recording a family history, you might use all three persons. The letters of a deceased family member could provide the first person narrative. Historical records — birth certificates, wedding announcements, newspaper clippings — might combine well with useful second person commentary. (For example, “Notice that the spelling of the names of immigrant grandparents differs from present-day spelling, which has been Anglicized.”) And a third person narrative can tell the history of the family: Where they originally settled, migrated, and diversified over time.)

## **Assignment three**

Continue to write 250 words each and every day. This time, pay attention to your voice. Spend some time playing with the first, second and third person narrative this month. Next month we’ll talk about “tense” and its connection with “person”. Until then, happy writing!