

Editorial Report



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Overall Impressions

First, congratulations on writing a fascinating story that confronts a lot of important and relevant issues facing the world today. You have a strong main character and a creative, intriguing plot that is certain to have readers asking questions about their own values while also being entertained by the possibilities of the world you created. You also do a great job exposing readers to different people, places, and scientific institutions around the world. You've done a lot of work here and you should be very happy with what you've accomplished so far.

My job is to help you strengthen your story through the lens of craft. To do that, I'm going to analyze your story from the standpoint of several major craft elements. I will teach you how to use those craft elements to enhance your story in a way that is more engaging to more people so that, ultimately, your story can have the greatest impact on the greatest number of readers. That will not be an easy or a short process, but it can be done!

Point of View (POV)

This is my biggest concern. It's also one of the hardest things for a writer to fully grasp. The POV of your story is inconsistent, both as a whole and in specific moments. It seems to me that the story starts out from the Third-Person Limited POV. This means that the narrator speaks from the 3rd person (he/she), but is limited in what they know and can see to just one or a couple of characters. For most of the first half of your novel, the narrator is sharing the world through the eyes of Steve—his thoughts, emotions, sight, hearing, etc. However, as the plot picks up the POV shifts from Third-Person Limited to Third-Person Omniscient. This means that the narrator is no longer limited to just Steve's eyes and ears, but rather, can see and hear the world through the eyes of every character past, present, and future. They know all and see all, they are omnipotent.

There are several things to discuss in order to understand and fix this issue.

First, it should be acknowledged that an inconsistent POV is disruptive to the narrative and should be avoided.

Second, you'll have to decide which POV is better for your story. If you choose First-Person Limited, this is a character-driven story that will focus on Steve—his life, his conflicts, his

relationships, and his growth. If you choose Third-Person Omniscient, this is a plot-driven story that will focus on events, drama, action, mystery, and so on.

In my personal opinion, I think your story will be stronger if you choose First-Person Limited. However, the way your narrative is currently structured, I think that would be almost impossible to accomplish without rewriting the entire story. For that reason, I recommend choosing Third-Person Omniscient. This will allow to keep all the major details and revelations, while making minor adjustments, particularly in the early chapters, to create a consistent POV.

Third, how do we do this? Choosing a consistent POV is a matter of determining the distance of the narrator. In every story there are three major players: the author, the narrator, and the characters. These three major players work together while at the same time having completely separate minds. The characters live in the world of the story. They don't know the narrator, they don't know the author. They speak, think, and act in a way that is separate from the author and narrator. The author, who is the mastermind of it all, is invisible. The author has their own thoughts, feelings, and knowledge, but they should never come through in the story...not tangibly, anyways. Finally, the narrator is the medium between the author and the characters. In most narratives, the position and distance of the narrator is consciously unknown to the readers. However, and I cannot stress this enough, the position and distance of the narrator must be known by the author and must be fixed. This means that every word and every sentence is filtered by the position and distance of the narrator. If the position and distance changes, there will be subtle differences that the reader will pick up unconsciously, thereby disrupting the reading process.

So, that means you need to consciously decide who your narrator is and what they know. Is your narrator God of the Universe looking down on his/her creation? Is your narrator, as you suggest in the last sentence, Steve looking back on his life? Is the narrator you, someone who has gained wisdom and wants to share that wisdom with others through the creation of these characters? How much does the narrator know? Can they see in everyone's minds? Can they see everything that's happening at any given time, or only what is happening to their main characters? Once you decide on the position and distance of the narrator, you can filter every word and sentence through that perspective. This will allow you to create consistency.

As you revise, you'll need to create consistency with your POV, but you'll also need to set expectations. I recommend (if you use third-person omniscient) letting the narrator into the minds of your main characters, but not your secondary characters. In order to set expectations, that means you need to draw back from Steve and closer to people like Felix and Bernardo. Let the reader know that, although Steve is the most important character, you'll be sharing the world from the viewpoint of several other characters, too.

Resources

Before doing anything I recommend reading these articles.

Standpoint of the Narrator -

<https://www.historythroughfiction.com/blog/standpoint-of-the-narrator-the-importance-of-consistency-in-literary-point-of-view>

Point of View in 2022 - <https://thewritepractice.com/point-of-view-guide/>

What is Third-Person Point of View in Writing -

<https://www.masterclass.com/articles/what-is-third-person-point-of-view-in-writing-how-to-write-in-third-person-narrative-voice-with-examples#the-3-types-of-third-person-point-of-view-in-writing>

Dialogue

Dialogue is tough because you have to strike a balance between the way people really talk, and the formulaic way people write. If you write the way people actually talk, it won't make much sense on the page. If you write in a formulaic, grammatically correct manner it comes across as unnatural. In my opinion, your dialogue is way too far on the formulaic side of things. It feels unnatural, while lacking nuance and inflection.

Before I go any further, I should admit that I am an introvert from the Midwest. I do not strike up conversations with total strangers. Steve, obviously, is different. Nevertheless, Steve speaks to people like he was a child. He is extremely direct and is not shy about asking questions no matter how inconvenient or offensive they may be.

With that said, there are a lot of good things about your dialogue. First, it's not excessive. Meaning, you're giving the reader what they need to know but not too much. Second, the dialogue between Steve and Felix is usually pretty strong. It's the dialogue between Steve and the secondary characters I'm more concerned about. And finally, your dialogue does a good job to move the story forward.

But, there are a lot of things you can do to improve your dialogue.

First, Steve needs to address people with more tact. He needs to say excuse me, please, how are you, and thank you. He needs to examine circumstances before opening his mouth. And he needs to be just a little more reticent with people. He needs to examine their verbal and non-verbal cues and respond appropriately.

Second, get rid of “retort.” In fact, get rid of any dialogue tag that is not “said” or “asked”. You want dialogue tags to be virtually invisible. By adding words like “retorted” and “came the reply” you are slowing down the reader and giving them more work.

Third, add more detail! Sometimes, it’s good and necessary for dialogue to go back and forth like a tennis match, but first you need to settle into the dialogue and then you need to transition out. If Steve or one of the main characters is one of the speakers, then tell us what they are observing first. Then, instead of dialogue tags use narrative beats that give us a look into the main character’s mind. Finally, give us some tangible details. What was the temperature of the room? What color was the wall painted? Did a loud motorcycle go by? Add things that will make the reader feel like they are there and part of the conversation.

Let’s look at an example from Chapter two when Steve is talking with Ali. Here’s what you write:

“All of Islam.”

“Everyone?”

“Yes.”

Wow! To think millions of Muslims believed this, and he had never heard of it.

“Doesn’t all that praying and fasting get boring?”

“No, it is how we live. Everyone does. We pray five times a day. If we don’t our leaders punish us. The habit is comforting.”

Steve thought that regimen sounded tedious. “Are people happy?”

“Yes, look at the people. They are happy.”

Steve asked, “Can I have your contact information?”

Ali said, “Sure, write this down.”

Steve raised an eyebrow. No one had a pen handy.

Steve memorized Ali's email address.

“One last question. Does religion fill your heart?”

“No,” replied Ali.

“OK, thank you for your time.”

Here’s how it can be enhanced:

“All of Islam.”

“Everyone?”

“Yes.”

Wow! To think, millions of Muslims believed this and he had never heard of it.

“Um, not to be rude, but doesn’t all that praying and fasting get boring? Maybe a little repetitive? I’m honestly curious.”

“Ha!” Ali laughed, his head titling all the way back to the headrest. “No, it’s how we live. It’s how we’ve always lived. We pray five times a day and if we don’t, our leaders punish us. The habit is actually...” he looked away, thinking, “...quite comforting.”

Steve considered this for a moment ignoring the steward who was walking by to collect garbage. “But, are people happy?” he finally asked.

Ali’s face lit up with a smile. “Yes, my friend. Look at the people. They are happy.”

Steve nodded, wishing he knew what that happiness felt like. “As I mentioned, I’m a journalist writing a column about world religions. Would it be all right if I got your contact information so I can get in touch with you later.”

“Yes, yes of course,” Ali said, “Alhamdulillah.”

“Alhamduli...?”

“It means ‘Praise to Allah.’”

“Ah,” Steve said as he searched his pockets for a pen.

“I will just tell you my email address. You will memorize it, no?” Ali said.

Steve closed his eyes and listened carefully, repeating Ali’s email address in his head over and over.

“One last question,” Steve said. “Does religion fill your heart?”

Without pause Ali said, “No.”

Steve nodded, surprised by the answer, then turned to face forward again staring blankly at the US Airways Magazine in the seat pocket in front of him.

Okay, you can see this is much longer, but it adds nuance, detail, and specific characteristics about the different characters. You’ll need to go through and reexamine all of your dialogue. Some is unnecessary and can be cut out. The rest will need to be expanded upon the way I have shown you above...staying true, however, to your own voice and way of writing.

Resources

Watch this video about adding narrative beats to dialogue -

https://www.tiktok.com/@ceemtaylor/video/711777631935892782?_t=8TrssAHkSvD&_r=1

Here’s another -

https://www.tiktok.com/@ceemtaylor/video/7117305858144390443?is_from_webapp=1&sender_device=pc&web_id=7118743948140135982

Character

Most stories can be categorized as character-driven or plot-driven. Yours seems to be a mixture of both. It starts out being very character-driven. In the beginning we meet Steve. We see the world through Steve’s eyes. We learn about his background. As the story continues, we stay with Steve. We learn what Steve learns and the world is filtered through his mind and his struggles.

But things shift about half-way through. This is caused, as mentioned earlier, by a shift in the POV, but the shift in POV becomes necessary as you change it from a character-driven story to a plot-driven story. In the second half of the novel you pull back from Steve, begin to highlight other characters like Liz and Bernardo, and focus on the changes in the world as a whole. You focus on the plot—the “Jesus Effect” as it were. The change has a way of crushing the expectations of the reader. We get to know Steve so well and his struggles with alcoholism, self-doubt, and curiosity. But then he disappears from the narrative. When you bring him back, the story is no longer filtered through him. Instead, he’s just one character among a cast of characters. You drop in tidbits about his personality—about his alcoholism—but they become nothing more than reminders. We want to see Steve grow, develop, and change. We want to see him face his demons and fail. We want to see him face his demons again and succeed.

The same can be said of Steve’s relationship with Felix. You do such a nice job of building it up. But then, in Chapter 6, Felix disappears. You drop her into the narrative with a phone call here and there, but mostly we’re just left wondering. As the story progresses you bring the relationship in and out of the narrative as it suits you, without actually doing the hard work of showing us what their relationship is like. Steve, for instance, has doubts about Felix and their marriage. But we never really get to know how prevalent those doubts are and how much they affect the relationship. I’m not married, but I imagine the life-long partnership between husband and wife supersedes just about everything else that goes on around them...even a phone call from God.

With that said, I actually think you need to focus on making this a plot-driven story rather than a character-driven story. I say that for the same reason I think you should use third-person omniscient rather than third-person limited. The story could be more effective and engaging as a character-driven narrative, but it would require an entire rewrite. But, now we’re getting into plot which I will comment on in my next heading. For now, let’s stick with character.

Here’s what I think your story needs regarding character: It needs more rounded main characters, more detailed secondary characters, and less tertiary characters.

I would classify your main characters as Steve, Felix, Liz, and Father Bernardo. Focus on Steve first. You need to show the reader how Steve developed into the man he is. In the first chapter, you have a great scene between Steve and his Sunday School teacher. Showing us this scene helps us understand who Steve is and how he became the man he is. Give us more of these scenes. For instance, a scene showing Steve having his first drink. A scene showing him going to church with his family as a child. A scene showing him trying to pray. A scene showing him succeed as a writer. A scene showing him fail as a brother, friend, father, partner.

I suggest that you write ten scenes about Steve that are completely separate from the novel. Write about his background. Write about his life growing up. Write anything you can to get to know him better. Then, choose the three best scenes and find a way to insert them into the novel.

Regarding Felix, Liz, and Bernardo, we just need more. Don't stick them on the periphery of the narrative bringing them in and out whenever you see fit. You have to remember that every character is the main character of their own story. Tell us more about these characters and their backgrounds. It doesn't have to be a lot, but it has to be enough that we begin to empathize with their situation. When they show up at random, or only when it serves the plot, it's hard to care.

The secondary characters I would define as those who stick around for more than one chapter. People like Ali, Leonardo, Sukarmo, Tim, and Rita. We don't need to know the backgrounds of these characters, but we do need their physical characteristics and unique traits. What do they look like, how old are they, what does their voice sound like, do they walk with a limp, do they have dimples when they smile, what kind of clothes do they wear? You have some of this, but you need more. Every time you introduce one of these characters, take a moment to describe them. Then, as they continue in the story, provide details about the thing or things that make them different and unique from everyone else.

Your tertiary characters I would define as those characters that only exist in one chapter, or just one page. You have a lot of them and it becomes very hard for the reader to keep track of who is who. I would suggest cutting some of these characters or leaving them unnamed. Take the bodyguard, Hector, for instance. Does he even speak one line of dialogue? Just call him a bodyguard instead of giving him a name. Examine all these characters and think hard: Do I really need them to tell this story? Or, will the story still function the same if I give them a title instead of a name?

Plot

You have a lot happening in this story. A lot of incredible events. Everytime we reach a climax, the story builds to another, then another, then another. It's fascinating to think about, but simply too much to take in and too much to write about effectively. My suggestion is to slow down. First, look at the story and break it into a series of events. For example - 1. Traveling with Felix 2. The Bliss 3. The Blackout 4. The second Bliss 5. Talking with Jesus 6. Life lessons among societal chaos... Something like that. You can be more specific, but I wouldn't be less specific.

Examine each event in your story, big and small, and decide how important it is to the narrative—decide how important it is to your message. Then, rank them. Cut the ones that are least important, and spend more time developing the scenes in the ones that are most important.

For example, The Bliss. It's one of the most important elements of your plot, but it only takes up about half a page. You give us a little bit of information about the atmosphere, but not much. You give us a little bit of information about the sound and the sight of it, but this barely scratches the surface. My advice is to write the scene again, but this time try and over-describe it. Write down every last detail, feeling, and thought you can think of. Not just about the Body being raised up, but about the looks on people's faces. We want to see the event but we also want to see those that are watching the event. Make it three or four pages long. Then, cut it back to one or one and a half pages keeping the most relevant and well-written details.

Do this for all the important events and all the important conversations. I'm thinking specifically about the conversation Steve's boss has with him about alcoholism. This is a big deal! You need to slow down that scene and tell us everything about it. The same goes for some of the conversations with Felix. The final chapter, for example, Steve and Felix have an intense and important conversation about their lives and relationship. You need to let the scene breathe. Write again but extend it. Write down everything you can about what they said, felt, saw, did, smelled. Then go back and cut it down.

To summarize—you may need to cut some of the events in order to enhance the others. Most importantly, you must enhance the important scenes. Extend them. Let the reader sit with them. Let the reader experience them.

Setting

For the most part, the setting is good because we know when and where we are. That's the most important thing. I'm a little concerned about the way each chapter starts out running without any transition between the chapters. In most novels, the first paragraph of each chapter provides context and sets the scene for what's to come. But, I'm not sure there is anything you need to change regarding the beginnings of your chapters because although it's different, it reflects your voice and style. However, I will say that overall there needs to be more clarity and more description. Make sure the reader is always clear about the time (year, season, month, day, morning, afternoon, night, hour) and the place. You have a lot of jumps in time. You tell the reader, but sometimes that's not clear enough. You need to show the passage of time, too. We need to see the seasons changing. We need to see the sun rising and falling. We need to see the characters getting older! Presumably, the novel covers about ten years of time and we should see how Steve has aged, both in appearance and perspective. Additionally, and this is the most important revision to your setting, you need to describe more, more, more! Tell us everything about a place. Include all five senses. Of course, you don't have to do this with every place. An airplane, for instance. We all know what an airplane looks, sounds, and feels like. But the Vatican? That, we don't know. Or America post Bliss. Or rural Jakarta. Go through the novel and look for instances where you tell the reader what a place looks like. Then revise it by showing them what it looks, feels, sounds, smells, and sometimes, tastes like. I would recommend

practicing first. Right down two pages with every detail about the Vatican you can think of. Then, choosing the best details, incorporate it into the novel by including a one-third of them.

Show vs. Tell

Every novelist hears this advice: Show, don't Tell. It doesn't matter if you're a first novelist or you're James Patterson. It is the truest element of craft but the hardest to obtain. In storytelling, for whatever reason, it is disengaging for the reader to be told what something is. For example, "The lamp is an antique." It is engaging for the reader to be shown what something is. For example, "Layers of dust covered its spiraling metal frame to its ornate, stained glass lamp shade giving its light a hue of blue and green." Example 2 is harder to do, but I've effectively shown the reader that what the character is seeing is an antique lamp without ever actually telling them it's an antique lamp. This is what you need to do throughout your novel. I've pointed out some examples in the manuscript, but you'll need to go through and find more. I would suggest that at least once on every page, find a sentence where you've told the reader something and rewrite it so that you are showing the reader. And it doesn't have to be just a single sentence, it could be an entire paragraph, or an entire scene. This will make the reader more engaged with your story. It will make them feel like they are there with the characters.

Resources

<https://self-publishingschool.com/show-dont-tell-writing/>

Free Indirect Style

You provide a lot of inner monologue, especially from Steve's POV. The first thing I'll say is that you should remove the double quotations otherwise it becomes confused with dialogue even when you add "he thought." You could use single quotes, italics, or nothing. But, ideally, you'll use free indirect style. In using free indirect style, you get so in tune with the character's mind that it's no longer necessary to attribute it to them as thought. In fact, if you do it well enough you can switch to the first-person and the reader won't even notice. It's difficult to accomplish, and I don't suggest removing attributions from every inner monologue, but I think you can for at least one quarter of them. Below, I've provided a link to an article I wrote about free indirect style. This article will give you a better idea of what it is and how to use it.

Resources

<https://www.historythroughfiction.com/blog/free-indirect-style>

Final Thoughts

This is a lot to digest. And, unfortunately, there's no easy fix. Before you even begin any revisions, you'll need to take a week or two to evaluate this information and read through the resources I've provided for you. Then you'll need to go through your manuscript revising it piece by piece. I would recommend doing at least three revisions. The first is when you go through and

create a consistent POV. The second is when you go through and revise the dialogue. The third is when you go through and provide all other revisions to the plot, characters, setting, etcetera. It will take time and it will take patience. But each time you revise, you're learning more about your story and your characters. And each time it will get better, it will get stronger.

Congratulations on what you've got here. It's a unique and fascinating story with some important messages. But now the hard work begins.