Who Knows What?

In writing, *who knows what*, is an important part of story telling. It concerns the author, the reader, the narrator, the point of view, and the characters. Even the rule of *Show, Don't Tell* is impacted by *who knows what*. The choices the author makes about *who knows what*, is crucial for believability, and is an essential part of style. Humour, and suspense depend of the fine application of different levels of knowledge shared with the reader.

Although it impacts on so many other writing techniques, this topic will limit itself to considering where the knowledge is and how it can be used. We will be diving into the separation between author, narrator, reader, and character knowledge.

- **The author creates the story.**
- **The narrator tells the story.**
- **The character lives the story.**
- **The reader experiences the story with the character, but informed by the narrator.**

Who Knows What?

Author Knowledge

The best part of being the author is that you – theoretically – know everything about the story. You even know each character's thoughts and background, if it's fiction. If it's not, you still know your own thoughts about it, the setting, all the events, the history that led up to it, and what happens after the story ends.

The problem with author knowledge is twofold: first, it can create a lot of clutter in your story if you put too much of it in, but second, you have to remember that neither your readers nor your characters know what you know. So anything you want either of them to know, you have to tell them specifically.

So what do you do with author knowledge? Here's what you don't do: you don't barf it all over your reader at the beginning of the story, making them wade through 700 words of brainvomit before they get to the 77 words where anything happens. It's great that you know your character had a rough childhood, or that they lost their favorite sticker book when they were five, but unless it informs their responses to something that happens in the story itself, you don't need to share that. Having said that, remember that the offscreen stuff you know about your characters affects how they react onscreen, and how they interact with other characters. Whether you're writing nonfiction or fiction, know more about your story than takes place on the page. Then edit that down to what the reader *needs to know* in order to understand the action.

Narrator Knowledge

The Narrator is not the author. They can lie, cover the truth, or have no idea what is real. The selected point of view of the story goes some way to deciding what sort of narrator your story has.

The most important relationship is the one between the reader and the character(s). But the narrator is the gatekeeper of the story, or the medium. The reader/character relationship is created via the medium of the narration. How much information/context is necessary? Should the narrator deviate from the present-time story at all and deliver backstory or flashes forward? What should be in scene and what should be summarized? How and how much should the narrator incorporate character thoughts and feelings? These are the challenges of narration. But they're also what can make for a brilliantly crafted story.

What does your narrator know? When writing in the third person, you need to work out if the narrative voice is going to be ***limited*** or ***omniscient***, or somewhere in between.

Omniscient Third Person Narrator

An Omniscient third person will allow you to move freely between your characters and gives you as many view points as you can think of within your one story. This is particularly useful for those big sprawling epics. The ability to place yourself in the mind of any character at any given time is quite liberating and opens up an almost unlimited pool of thoughts and angles through which you can present your story.

This kind of omniscient third person can also be used to give the reader information that the characters don't yet have. Either one character spills a secret when someone else is out of the room, or the author simply chooses to let the reader in on what's happening while the characters are still in the dark.

Limited Third Person Narrator

A Limited third person, on the other hand, can be used on a smaller scale. If your story is centred around the actions of a single character, this can be quite effective. It maintains the element of detachment that comes with any third-person voice, but also stays relatively close to the one character you are following.

Semi-Omniscient Narrator

But what about finding some middle ground? A Semi-Omniscient narrator. This would be when a story is told from several different viewpoints, but rather than allowing the narrative to jump from person to person within a particular scene, the author sticks to a single character's viewpoint for the duration of the scene and only switches to someone else when there is a natural break in the action.

Character as Narrator

When it comes to your first-person narratives, the choice isn't so much between *limited* and *omniscient* as it is between ***Unreliable*** and ***Reliable***.

Unreliable Narrators

The credibility of your narrative voice can have a huge impact on how a reader engages with the story.

When employing an unreliable narrator, the reader is tasked with trying to work out if the narrator is telling the truth, lying, or is in fact insane. By calling into question the narrative character's reliability, the reader's approach to each situation in the book is altered. Nothing can be taken at face value and so the reader enters into a dialogue with the book in trying to figure out what the real flow of events is.

Unreliable narrators don't have to be the main driving force of a story, either. They are particularly handy for filling in back story or setting up expectations about other characters that are then discovered later on. One of the most famous cases of unreliable narrators in literature is *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë. The task of narrating the tragic story of Cathy and Heathcliff falls mainly to Lockwood and Nelly Dean. Each of these characters approach the story with their own prejudices towards the main characters, and a certain lack of insight into their own personalities.

Having your readers question the narrator's reliability before the main action of the story is even considered, is a very useful tool for keeping them interested. By encouraging readers to decide this sort of detail for themselves, you allow them to come to their own conclusions in relation to every other aspect of the story. This will leave an impression on them that will keep them talking about your work for quite some time.

Reliable Narrators

Of course, this doesn't negate the need for reliable narrators as well. There is such a thing as overdoing things when it comes to creating untrustworthy characters. One way to balance this out is to set them against another character whose integrity is not called into question.

If you opt to have a reliable character narrating your story, there are still a few things you can take into consideration in terms of what it is the reader will trust about them. Is it their knowledge of the story's events? This could mean that your narrative character experienced the events themselves and is recounting them (or is currently living through them if you are writing in first person).

Or is there something in the character's personality that is inherently trustworthy?

A good example of the use of reliable narrative voice is *I Am Pilgrim* by Terry Hayes, which combined first person, past tense with a reliable and omniscient character (omniscient in that the narrative character was retelling the story after the events and therefore was privy to more details about the antagonist than if he was telling the story as it happened). The narrative character of *I Am Pilgrim* is a former spy who is brought back

into the world of espionage due to a series of events. You find yourself very early on trusting his narration for several reasons:

Firstly, his knowledge of the events is all first-hand, as he is recounting his own experiences.

Secondly, when he does venture into details that he has learned from other people (mainly centring around the book's antagonist), he always cites his sources and explains how he came across them – explaining how he tracked down particular documents, or retelling interviews he carried out with key witnesses.

Thirdly, he is not afraid to point out his own shortcomings. He does not try to paint himself as the perfect hero throughout his story. He talks openly about mistakes he made in his early career and mistakes he made in relation to the specific case that the book covers.

Reader Knowledge

Unlike the author, the reader comes to the story with almost no knowledge of the characters or setting, except in a few cases:

1. You're writing nonfiction and they actually know you or follow you.
2. You're writing a sequel to something they've read.
3. You're writing fan fiction.

Unless one of those three cases applies, your reader knows nothing that you know. So part of your story needs to be about transferring an appropriate amount of author knowledge to the reader.

Part of the challenge of transferring knowledge to the reader Is timing. What's happening in your story, and how much do they need to know to understand it? When do they need to know it? At the time the action takes place? Well before the action? After, because it's a Big Reveal? Are you drip-feeding hints to foreshadow something later in the story?

A good example of transferring knowledge to the reader at the right time is in Ian' Fleming's James Bond book (not the movie) Casino Royale. Fleming wants to make Bond do something so incredibly cool during an esoteric card game that the reader is astonished and impressed with the character almost immediately. But Fleming knows that, unlike himself and his character, most readers won't play baccarat. So he spends nearly two entire pages of the novel teaching you to play baccarat, in one long and engaging aside, just to set up the move Bond is about to make. Without that knowledge there's no possible way to understand the nuance of the play the character makes, nor the connotations of it. And all that knowledge is necessary to the reader's understanding of the character. By balancing that *tell* (how to play) with *show* (the play itself), Fleming gives you an intense and immediate sense of who James Bond is, without having to tell you anything specific about the character.

Character Knowledge

Like readers, characters don't have any knowledge you don't put into them. Unlike readers, you can put knowledge into characters outside the lines of the story. Each character comes to the story with a background and knowledge of their own.

Most character knowledge problems arise when something happens in your story and a character isn't there, but you forget the character doesn't know about it and they later refer to it. Don't do that. And don't summarize character knowledge for the reader. If it's relevant, the character will bring it up. It's like when you remember something: you're not really thinking about that memory until you need it, right?

On the other hand, don't have your character conveniently "remember" things right before they need it all the time. Give the reader enough of an understanding of their background that it makes sense they'd know how to hotwire a car, or give CPR, or shoot a bow and arrow.

Remember, your characters can't act on information they don't know. So if you want James Bond to rescue *Misogynist Pun* from *Racist Joke*, you need to give Bond enough information to figure out where she's being held hostage.

Being mindful and strategic with your use of *who knows what*, can also generate tension … or even humor! Think how many times in a comedy you've known something the character didn't? Cringe humour makes good use of this fact.

The point is, when the reader knows something the character doesn't, suspense builds. You can release this tension with humor, terror, or catharsis, or use it to create an ambiguous end to a story.

The Narrator's Presence In A Story

Think of a window. A freshly cleaned window is practically invisible. It is so clear one gazes through to the other side without noticing it.

If a window is a little dirty, one notices the window but barely. Most of one's attention is still focused on what is on the other side.

On the other hand, if the window is very dirty then one notices the window almost as much as what is on the other side.

A transparent window → An invisible narrator
An invisible narrator → No personality of their own

An opaque window → A visible narrator
A visible narrator → A personality of their own

What is the difference between a ***visible*** and ***invisible narrator***? Well, clearly, the least visible narrator is going to be one that tells a story from the third-person, limited, where their knowledge is restricted to what the character knows. Also, they will never turn to the reader and indicate they know what's going on, that they are a narrator in a story you are being entertained by. In this case, the narrator seems non-existent and one focuses solely on the viewpoint character and experiences the story world through the viewpoint character's senses.

On the other hand, the most visible narrator, or one form of them, would be one who turns to the audience and announces that the gig is up. They know they're telling a story to an audience, to you. But that's not the only way to become aware of a narrator. Whenever the narrator tells you, the reader, about something the viewpoint character doesn't know the narrator becomes visible. That is, such things encourage a reader to focus on the narrator and not just the viewpoint character.

Breaking the Fourth Wall

An interesting, and sometimes useful technique using, or abusing, different levels of knowledge between the participants in a story, is breaking the "fourth wall."

The fourth wall is a term that comes from the acting world, referring to the fourth "wall" that actors pretend separates them from the audience. When an actor directly addresses the audience, it's called "breaking the fourth wall."

But this isn't limited to visual formats.

In writing, you can also break the fourth wall by having the character speaking directly to your readers. Sometimes these are called "asides" or "authorial interjections." It often means the narrator or character pauses one thought to share some of their inner thoughts and views directly with the reader.

Here's an example:

"*I love living in the Selwyn District. (Well...only Darfield. I wouldn't be caught dead buying in Rolleston). The culture and excitement here can't be beat.*"

See how the original thought is broken up by a peek at the author's thoughts and feelings? It's essentially a nifty cheat for more conversational, natural-sounding writing.

Of course, you can't use this tactic just anywhere. There are pros and cons to deploying it.

Pros of Asides in Writing

- They help stress important ideas/provide a deeper understanding around the complexities of events or concepts
- They help illuminate the author's thoughts, feelings, or opinions

- They allow the author to reveal something they want the readers to know
- They make the reader feel personally addressed
- They allow the author to advise and act as a guide for readers

Cons of Asides in Writing

- If done too subtly, they can go unnoticed or be interpreted as sloppy, unfocused writing
- They can sometimes disrupt the pacing of your writing, thus hurting overall readability
- They can seem clumsy or awkward if correct punctuation isn't used

So...how do you do it right? There are a few easy ways:

First person

In the first person format, the author is already relaying the story to the reader. This means addressing the reader in a slightly more direct way can happen naturally.

Example:

> *I'm always running late for work. In reality, it's because I oversleep, but I tell my boss it's because of terrible traffic. Added downside: I'm always left with the final grainy dregs in the break room coffee pot.*

Using asides while writing in first person helps the author create a feeling like putting a hand on the reader's arm to say: "*Here's what I really think about this*", or, "*Here's what this really means*."

Em dashes, parenthesis, and footnotes

Interjecting a sentence with a thought inside em dashes or parentheses makes it easy for you to briefly redirect the reader's attention to a point you want to make or a piece of information you think they should know.

Example:

> *Micheal roamed down the street, his shoes tripping along the rough stones. His ambling, slow pace was unusual to the people watching from balconies in his neighborhood—they were used to seeing him zip along at a fast clip, head down, arms swinging—but tonight, limbs heavy with wine, he moved without any sense of hurry, as if underwater.*

This approach works well in highly conversational writing, but keep in mind that it can break up the flow of your writing. Try to keep the interjections short and then get back to what you were saying.

Or, if you'd rather keep things moving and use a less invasive approach, you could instead use footnotes to relay these comments to the reader at the bottom of a page. Author's call.

No matter which approach you choose, remember: Writing this way helps you quickly and easily connect with your readers. It's also a shortcut to more stylized writing, giving your writing voice a more signature sound and flow.

Sources

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Writing Challenge

Write a story or scene that makes strong use of differing levels of knowledge between the reader, and the different characters. Maybe have a couple of characters discussing some directions they've been given, which turn out to be wrong anyway, or perhaps create a little mystery for your characters to solve. You may like to have various revelations and with-holding of information as the story progresses. The suggested length is anywhere from about 350 words to 1000, but this is only a guideline seeing as I can never keep within the word limits myself.

Use any point of view you like, and any genre. You may like to include 4 or 5 of the story elements below.

A blackberry patch
A vehicle with an unusual defect
The piano player has hiccups
Market day
A red pen
A private conversation is overheard
Someone reads out a news article
A locket with a photo in it
The guest room
Two characters are no longer speaking to each other
A rusted chain
Someone shares their feelings for another
The ace of spades
A mirror that does not show what is in front of it.
Stuck up a tree
A map
A red pen
A cloth shopping bag
Smart phone
Hair straightener
Cricket bat
Empty coffee plunger
Cat
Magpie
A creature of dream
Someone lets go of something at the wrong time
An official list of names, of which one, is your main character

More Writing Challenges

[Courtesy of a discussion with ChatGPT] Here are some suggested writing challenges which cover; *irony*, *tension*, *humour*, *point of view*, *unreliable narration*, and *direct reader engagement*, all tied back to "*who knows what*."

Warm-Up (Quick Prompts, 200–300 words)

The Omitted Fact
Write a scene where one character knows a crucial detail that the others don't. The catch: you may not reveal the fact directly until the very last line. Let tension or humour build from the ignorance of the other characters.

The Window Narrator
Imagine your narrator is a window. Write a short scene in two versions:

- Clean glass (invisible narrator): only what the character sees/does.
- Grimy glass (visible narrator): the narrator intrudes, comments, or hints at things the character can't know.

Medium-Length (500–700 words)

The Card Trick (Reader Education)
Like Fleming explaining baccarat in Casino Royale: write a scene where a character is about to do something impressive, but the reader won't understand unless you "teach" them something first (game rules, cultural nuance, superstition, etc.). Make the teaching engaging, not dry exposition.

The Mistranslated Memory
A character recalls an important event from childhood. Later in the scene, another character (or the narrator) reveals the memory is partly false, incomplete, or misinterpreted. Explore how the shift in knowledge reshapes the reader's understanding.

Comedy of Errors
Write a dialogue-driven scene where the reader knows something obvious that the characters don't. Lean into cringe comedy, misunderstandings, or dramatic irony. (Think sitcom-level awkwardness, but in any setting/genre.)

Longer Pieces (800–1200 words)

The Unreliable Witness
Tell a short story from the viewpoint of an unreliable narrator. They may be lying, delusional, or prejudiced — but they don't see themselves that way. The reader should slowly suspect the truth as the story unfolds.

The Shifting Lens
Write the same short scene three times:
- From a limited third-person narrator (only one character's thoughts).
- From a semi-omniscient narrator (switches perspectives at a scene break).
- From a fully omniscient narrator (can enter anyone's mind at will).

Afterwards, compare how the balance of knowledge changes the feel of the story.

The Fourth Wall Break
Create a story where the narrator or character suddenly addresses the reader directly. Use it either to:
- Confess a hidden truth,
- Warn the reader about something, or
- Joke about the absurdity of the situation.

Make the interruption feel like a dramatic crack in the narrative.

Experimental / Advanced

The Author's Cheat
Write a short story where the author's knowledge "leaks" into the narrative. This could take the form of:
- A narrator who suddenly reveals the ending halfway through,
- A character who somehow knows things they shouldn't, or
- An "editor's note" intruding on the story.

Push the boundary of believability while keeping it engaging.

The Knowledge Knot
Construct a scene where:
- The author knows the whole truth.
- The narrator only knows half of it.
- The character knows even less.
- The reader knows something the character doesn't, but not everything the author does.

The challenge: keep the layering clear and deliberate without confusing the reader.

Who Knows What?