

# Fixing Fatal Fiction Flubs... POV/SDT

By Tim Shoemaker

## POINT-OF-VIEW

### Three reasons why getting Viewpoint right is so critical

POV mistakes CONFUSE readers, DESTROY part of the story experience for the reader, and...

### There are 2 main viewpoint problems people wrestle with...

1. **"HEAD-hopping"**—switching viewpoint characters in mid-scene. Seeing, hearing, thinking, feeling, etc., from the perspective of someone other than the viewpoint character.
2. **"SORTA-psychic"**—(omniscient)—relaying information that the viewpoint character couldn't possibly have seen, heard or known, unless of course they're *psychic, a time traveler, or having "out-of-body" experiences.*

### Sample A- Nate is the viewpoint character

"Skinny jeans. White top. 2 o'clock." Nate barely nodded toward the group of girls. Howie slung his arm over Nate's shoulder. "Oh yeah." Nate didn't want to stare—but couldn't help watching her. There was something different about her. Good. Clean. Fresh. No makeup—or very little. But she didn't need it. She was perfect just the way she was. Not that she was the prettiest girl in the group. But there was something about her. "Who is she?" "My next girlfriend," Howie said. "Her name is Beth." "Beth." Nate whispered her name. "She looks so . . ." He struggled for the right word. "Wholesome." "Wholesome?" Howie snickered. "Sounds like a loaf of bread or something. What I wouldn't do to get a slice of her." Nate jammed him with his elbow. Beth turned at that same moment and saw Howie double over. *Why would a guy do something like to his friend?* She watched him straighten up, rubbing his ribs. Howie noticed her watching him. "Hey, look—she's got her eyes on me already." He held his side and winced, hoping it looked real enough to get him a little sympathy. "Maybe she'll offer to kiss me to make it better." Nate could feel his face getting warm. Beth turned and tried to focus on the other girls talking. The last thing she needed right now was attention from another boy. She'd switched schools to distance herself from the last one. She shuddered and silently thanked God she'd ended things with Brad. But things weren't over in Brad's mind. Even though she had no way of knowing it now, tomorrow she would find out just how obsessed he still was with her.

### -Do you see the head hopping problems?

- NATE'S POV, his thoughts (he couldn't help watching her),
- BETH'S POV, her thoughts (why would somebody do that),
- HOWIE'S POV, his thoughts (notices her watching, etc.)
- NATE'S POV, his feelings (could feel face get warm)
- BETH'S POV, her thoughts (tries to refocus, thanks God)

-Then what happens in the last paragraph? A viewpoint problem—a sudden jump to the future, (omniscient). Author is giving information instead of it coming from the POV character.

### Sample B-Mark is the point of view person.

Mark stepped up to the coach's desk and tried not to look as shaky as he felt. He squared his shoulders, standing as tall as he could. "I'd like to sign up for basketball tryouts." Coach Ferguson sized him up in a quick glance. No way was this kid going to make the basketball team. Not unless he had some kind of massive growth spurt before next week. *Too much rice and not enough spaghetti.* He chuckled to himself. He liked that. "Clipboard's on the wall. To the right of the door." Nice and high. By design. It was a way of sending a message to short guys with tall dreams. He watched to see if the kid would grab a chair or ask for help. -Where are the POV problems? (the coach's thoughts.)  
-Why? (Mark can't know them. He is POV character)  
-What type of POV problem is it? (Head-hopping)

### Let's stay in Mark's POV this time...

Mark stepped up to the coach's desk and tried not to look as shaky as he felt. He squared his shoulders, standing as tall as he could. "I'd like to sign up for basketball tryouts," he said. Coach Ferguson glanced up. Mark could feel him sizing him up. Already cutting him from the team before he'd even seen him handle a ball. "Clipboard's on the wall. To the right of the door."

Mark looked at the clipboard. Obviously out of reach. Just like his hopes of making the team if he didn't think of something—fast.

**Sample C- *Hanson is the viewpoint character. He's holding the POV finder.***

Hanson ran like a kid being chased after breaking a window. Only it wasn't an angry homeowner on his heels. It was *him*—and he had a knife. Vice-like cramps tortured Hanson's right side. He couldn't go much longer. Hanson's shoes churned up the gravel under his feet. He didn't dare look back. The man was too close. The sound of his commando boots in the loose stones behind him made his gut twist.

"Give it up, Hanson!" The voice sounded strong, mocking. "You're finished!" The man's lip curled in a hideous sneer. *Gotta keep going.* Hanson leaped across the ditch and scrambled up the embankment. *Can't stop now. CAN'T!*

**-POV problem?** (man's lip curled)

**-Why is this a problem?** (Hanson is clearly looking straight ahead)

**-What type of POV problem is this?** (Sorta-psychic)

**-How can we fix it?** (Drop the lip part or have him imagine the guy's lip curling.)

**Sample D-*Susan is the viewpoint character & has the POV finder.***

"I hate you. I'll always hate you."

Little did Susan know that she would long to take those words back in just two days. There were problems brewing on the horizon for both of them, but only in time would they realize just how those problems intricately connected them to one another.

**-POV problem?** (When we get insight into the future.)

**-Why is this a problem?** (The viewpoint character can't know this.)

**-What do we call this?** ("sorta-psychic")

**-How do we fix it?** (Use foreshadowing if you want, but it must be subtle.)

**POV isn't just a mistake to avoid, but a tool to make my writing stronger.  
The KEY is to stay DEEPLY ENTRENCHED in your POV character's head.**

**Sample E *Mark is our viewpoint character.***

-Mark just moved to a new school, doesn't have friends, loves b-ball, goes to tryouts

Basketball tryouts. The words were scrawled on a plain sheet of paper and taped to the locker room door. Mark read the sign again, pushed through the doors, and stepped into the gym.

The highly polished maple floors reflected the overhead lighting. He stopped beside a set of wooden bleachers to stretch. A long paper banner with *Go Chargers* painted in orange and blue letters hung across the far end of the gym.

Another paper sign hung below the scoreboard with *We Love You Chargers* and little red hearts painted across it.

A bunch of other eighth grade guys were already on the floor. A couple of coaches stood at the far end of the court comparing notes on their clipboards. Halfway up the bleachers a cluster of girls sat giggling and talking over each other.

**-But in reality, is this the way Mark would go into the gym for basketball tryouts?**

**-Let's try it again.** but this time we'll stay in the viewpoint character's head better.

Basketball tryouts. The words were scrawled across a plain sheet of paper and taped to the locker room door. Mark stared at the sign and dried his palms on his gym shorts. He could hear shoes squeaking on the gym floor on the other side. Could smell the sweat. Squaring his shoulders, he pushed open the door and strode toward the bleachers.

There must have been twenty guys on the floor already. Every one of them wore an orange summer traveling team jersey, like they wanted to remind the coach they were already part of the team. That they *belonged*.

Mark wouldn't exactly look like he was part of the group wearing his white t-shirt. But that was okay. Good, really. He didn't want to get lost in the pack. He needed to stand out.

Guys ran up and down the court. Shooting and showboating for the coaches, no doubt. Others stood around in small clusters, laughing and talking loud. Like they weren't at all worried about making the first cut.

Mark started his stretching routine and studied the competition. They had height, he had to give them that. Exactly what did they eat in the Midwest that triggered their growth spurt? Whatever it was, he'd like to get it on Mom's grocery list.

**-What is Mark really concerned about when he walks into the gym? *The competition.* **Stay deeply entrenched in your character's POV—show everything from their mindset—which can change. If you do... your fiction will get stronger.****

**SHOW DON'T TELL**

**To write well... we need to SHOW A STORY... NOT TELL IT.** Readers want the FULL EXPERIENCE of a good story—NOT a QUICK SUMMARY of what is going on.

Think of your readers as BLIND... they can't see the GREAT STORY in your HEAD.

**Example A**

**Telling:** *Katy was really cold while she waited for the bus.*

**Showing:** *Katy rubbed her hands together, then cupped them over her mouth and blew on them. It didn't help. She drove her hands in her pockets and jumped in place. She had to get her blood circulating. She looked down the block. Still no bus. If she'd known the driver was going to be this late she'd have brought her gloves—or maybe some hot cocoa.*

**Did we ever SAY Katy was cold? How do we know she was cold?**

**Example B**

**Telling:** *Kyle's Dad found out what he did and grounded him. Kyle's Dad was really angry.*

**Showing:** *Kyle's dad slammed his fist on the table so hard that coffee burped out of his cup and splattered onto the floor. "How many times have I told you not to hang around that kid?"*

*Kyle kept his eyes on the floor and his mouth shut. Did Dad really want him to answer that?*

*"Look at me when I talk to you."*

*Kyle forced himself to look up. There was something almost funny about his Dad's face—so incredibly red—with that vein popping out in his neck like he'd swallowed an extension cord.*

*"So what am I supposed to do with you—huh?"*

*Kyle raised his hand. "Give me another chance?"*

*Dad leaned in close. "Go to your room, smart guy."*

*Kyle didn't wait to be told again. He bolted from his chair and stomped out of the kitchen.*

*"And you're going to stay there... all weekend."*

*Terrific. Kyle took the stairs two at a time.*

*"Did you hear me?"*

*How could he not? Everybody in a three-block radius probably heard him.*

**We never used the word ANGRY once... but you got a picture.**

**Example C**

**Telling:** *Carlos was the kind of guy who was really helpful. And not only that, Carlos was really strong.*

**Showing:** *Anthony struggled to lift the plastic storage container while Matthew slouched in his chair, watching. "What does Mrs. Blair keep in here, bricks or something? Give me a hand."*

*Matthew grabbed the other end. Together they raised the box a few inches off the floor, shuffled a few feet—and let it drop. Matthew put his hands on his hips and arched his back. "This thing weighs a ton. Maybe we can slide it."*

*Carlos walked into the room and set his backpack on his desk.*

*"I got a better idea," Anthony whispered. "Let's make somebody else try to move it."*

*Matthew grinned.*

*"Hey Carlos," Anthony said. "Mrs. Blair needs someone to grab this box for her."*

*Carlos hustled over, snapped the container off the floor and hefted it onto his shoulder in one smooth move.*

*"Where does she want me to put it?"*

**Is Carlos HELPFUL? STRONG? We let the reader COME TO THAT CONCLUSION.**

**If you want the reader to KNOW WHAT SOMEONE IS LIKE... DON'T JUST TELL THEM... put them in ACTION and LET THEM SEE IT.**

**Example D**

EXAMPLE from CODE OF SILENCE...

**Resist the urge to just TELL what is GOING ON.**

**or what someone LOOKS LIKE or what someone is FEELING. SHOW your reader.**

**FOUR TIPS FOR "SHOWING THE MOVIE"... for SHOWING INSTEAD of TELLING.**

1. SHOW THE READER WHAT IS HAPPENING... Let them INTERPRET WHAT IS GOING ON.
2. CHOOSE THE WORDS THAT SHOW THE PICTURE BEST...

**3. SHOW ME ONLY WHAT IS IMPORTANT TO THE CHARACTER** at THAT MOMENT... nothing else. Showing is NOT about just putting more description in your writing. Too much description is often a mistake.

**4. For REALISTIC... MOVIE-LIKE WRITING...** show me what is going on OUTSIDE your character... and then show me how your character REACTS. JUST A LITTLE OF EACH.

#### Example E

**Telling:** Cheryl's Golden Retriever walked over and lay down next to her. Cheryl loved her dog.

#### Showing:

The Golden Retriever padded over to where Cheryl sat on the top step of the porch.  
Cheryl smiled and reached for her "Hi, Candy-girl."  
Tail answering happily, Candy curled up on the warm deck and snuggled close.  
Cheryl cradled her dog's head on her lap. "I'm going to tell you a secret, Candy-girl," she whispered.  
"Something I haven't told anyone."  
As if eager to hear, Candy raised her head slightly.  
Gently working one hand behind Candy's ears, Cheryl stroked and caressed the soft folds. Glancing over her shoulder, Cheryl leaned in close. "I think I love him."  
Candy looked at her with an unblinking, almost dreamy gaze.  
"And I think you like him too." Cheryl kissed the top of her retriever's head. "I just wish Mom would see him like you do."

**-In the second example, can you see Cheryl loves her dog?**

**Something going on OUTSIDE of our character...Then SHOW how THEY REACT to that.**

#### Outside of our character:

The dog approaches.

#### Reaction:

Cheryl smiles (feelings) reaches (action) greets her (speech).

#### Outside of our character:

Dog is happy, lays next to her.

#### Reaction:

Cheryl cradles dogs head. Starts to share her secret feelings.

#### Outside our character:

Candy raises head, appears to listen.

#### Reaction:

Caresses her dog, tells her the secret.

#### Outside our character:

Dog looks at her with dreamy gaze.

#### Reaction:

Kisses dog and talks to her.

**We show a little of what is going on OUTSIDE our character...**

**Then a little of how our character REACTS...**

**-What they DO**

**-What they THINK**

And we end up giving them writing that SHOWS a story instead of just summing it up.

**Combine these techniques to show the story along with the POV things you learned... writing from the perspective of the POV character. Do this and your writing will get stronger... guaranteed!**

**Thanks for attending!! Keep writing! -Tim**