

Symbolism

DISCUSSION FROM LAST MEETING

Your Challenge for the this meeting was to: Write a story or poem about anything that uses symbols. Come to the meeting prepared to talk about the symbolism you chose to use in case people didn't pick up on them.

Internal dialogue — inner monologue

First, what is it? — A ‘monologue’ literally means ‘speaking alone.’ Internal or inner monologue is a useful literary device, often used to give characters depth and intrigue. It reveals a character’s secret thoughts or intentions; their private impressions, desires, frustrations or dilemmas. Dialogue reveals character relationships, and their converging or competing goals.

Internal dialogue is the heartbeat of fiction. It helps us control our pacing. Without enough internal dialogue or without strong internal dialogue, our fiction can end up confusing and emotionless. We have people randomly acting, with no solid reason or purpose.

Internal dialogue is your character thinking to themselves, so it needs to sound as much like them as their spoken dialogue. Always thing, what words would your character — not you — use in this situation?

How and why might you use internal monologue?

1. Use inner monologue to show characters’ unspoken thoughts

For example, ‘I was apprehensive when I approached the derelict building.’ Or, ‘Luisa was apprehensive when she approached the building.’ These approaches show characters’ feelings. But you can also create immediacy, an engaging sense of a character’s state, by making characters’ actual thoughts intrude on the scene.

Example from David Mitchell’s *Cloud Atlas*. The character Luisa Rey, an investigative journalist, has found out about a dangerous environmental coverup. This example occurs when her boss is berating her for missing a meeting:

Grelsch glares at her.

‘I got a lead, Dom.’

‘You got a lead.’

I can’t batter you, I can’t fool you, I can only hook your curiosity. ‘I phoned the precinct where Sixsmith’s case was processed.’

The monologue reveals Luisa’s thoughts about her boss while she’s in trouble:

- The power Grelsch has over Luisa as his employee – it shows Luisa’s awareness of the balance of power in this conversation
- Luisa’s knack for using stories to get herself out of trouble

Inner monologue here, by revealing Luisa’s unspoken thoughts mid-dialogue, adds to her character as well as illustrating her relationship with her boss.

2: Describe others from a character's POV using internal monologue

When your protagonist is the **first person narrator** in your story, they can describe other characters in narration. For example, your character might see a frail looking man and narrate 'he looked like he had a week to live.' But in **third person limited**, a little internal monologue can be a useful filtering device for slipping into a character's private consciousness and describing their impressions.

Take this example, also from *Cloud Atlas*:

The elevator doors close just as Luisa Rey reaches them, but the unseen occupant jams them with his cane. 'Thank you,' says Luisa to the old man. 'Glad the age of chivalry isn't totally dead.' He gives a grave nod of acknowledgment.
Hell, Luisa thinks, he looks like he's been given a week to live.

Why is this internal monologue effective? Firstly, it gives us a keen sense of Luisa's voice (her use of the curse word 'hell' indicating her 'tough cookie' persona). Secondly, it succinctly reveals a key detail about the other character's appearance.

When you're writing in third person narration, you can use italics like this to take us deeper into a character's mind. This will reveal their impressions in the moment.

3: Show characters' private dilemmas

Inner monologue is useful for showing characters' private dilemmas and internal conflicts. In Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* the protagonist Rodion Raskolnikov commits a crime, murdering a pawnbroker. Throughout the novel, we witness Raskolnikov's anxious, paranoid state of mind. Dostoevsky uses internal monologue expertly to show his character's complex fears and choices.

In this scene, Raskolnikov is about to make his getaway after committing the crime. Note how even though the author narrates the passage in third person, the wording makes it feel as though we are in the character's mind:

But at the same instant several men talking loudly and fast began noisily mounting the stairs [...] Filled with despair he went straight to meet them, feeling 'come what must!' If they stopped him – all was lost; if they let him pass – all was lost too; they would remember him [...] they were only a flight from him – and suddenly deliverance! A few steps from him, on the right, there was an empty flat with the door wide open, the flat on the second floor where the painters had been at work, and which, as though for his benefit, they had just left.

The internal monologue shows the character weighing different outcomes – meeting the men on the stairs or not. This gives the scene tension and immediacy.

You can use internal monologue similarly, to show your characters at important decision-making crossroads.

4: Reveal characters' self perceptions

In our own thinking we can begin question ourselves, we often engage in self-talk, reflecting on our actions. For example, if you were to knock over and break a glass, you might say to yourself 'why am I so clumsy?'

For example, in a story where a character's primary or secondary struggle is accepting their body, there may be a scene where they're looking in a mirror:

He turned and stood at an angle, sucking in his belly. *God, how did I get to this?*

Or, imagine a character preparing for a job interview:

He lifted his chin, pulling the knot in his tie a little tighter. *You've got this.* He winked. *Stop, definitely don't wink at them.* He pulled a stern face. *No, you look like you're interviewing to be someone's damn body guard.*

These lines convey that the character is nervous about the interview and self-conscious about how he will come across visually.

5: Use to show a character's personal associations

People often use the words 'inner monologue' when they mean 'stream of consciousness'. Stream of consciousness is a specific literary technique. We associate it with Modernist authors such as Virginia Woolf and James Joyce.

Take, for example, this passage of internal monologue in Woolf's novel *To the Lighthouse*:

But what have I done with my life? Thought Mrs. Ramsay, taking her place at the head of the table, and looking at all the plates making white circles on it. 'William, sit by me,' she said. 'Lily,' she said, wearily, 'over there.' They had that – Paul Rayley and Minta Doyle – she, only this – an infinitely long table and plates and knives [...] And meanwhile she waited, passively, for someone to answer her, for something to happen. But this is not a thing, she thought, ladling out soup, that one says.

It's clear from Ramsay's inner monologue that she has mixed feelings about her life being confined to serving dinners and entertaining guests. This piece of monologue suggests Ramsay associates domestic life with lack ('she, only this – an infinitely long table').

Woolf's use of stream of consciousness – and by extension, inner monologue – is effective because we see characters' complex psychology. Note, too, how Woolf:

- **Blends inner monologue with dialogue and descriptive detail:** We see the 'white circles' the plates make; the people seated around the table
- **Anchors internal monologue in three-dimensional action:** We read Ramsay's thoughts as she takes her place at the head of the table and serves everyone.

If you use stream of consciousness to reveal a character's private desires or frustrations, remember to blend it with action and setting too. This ensures a balance between characters' hidden inner lives and the material world around them, along with the cause and effect of their words and deeds.

Save direct internal dialogue for the most important thoughts.

Direct internal dialogue is dialogue that's written in first person, present tense. Here's an example to make it clear:

Emily pasted a smile on her face. *I still hate you. I'll never stop hating you.* "Long time no see. How have you been?"

Because direct internal dialogue is in first person, present tense—even when we're writing in a third person, past tense story—we need to italicize it. But the italics draw a lot of attention to it.

Most internal dialogue can be written as indirect internal dialogue (where we stay in the same person and tense as the story). I'll give you another quick example to see the difference.

Emily pasted a smile on her face. She still hated him. She'd never stop hating him. "Long time no see. How have you been?"

That's indirect internal dialogue, and staying in the same tense helps it flow naturally with what's around it.

DISCUSSION HERE!

Emphasizing a thought through direct internal dialogue should be done sparingly, when we really need to draw attention to an important thought. It's like exclamation marks. They lose their oomph if you pepper your pages with them.

Make sure you don't repeat the same thing in internal dialogue that you're also showing through spoken dialogue or action.

Repetitious internal dialogue makes for boring, flabby reading. For example, if we use internal dialogue to show a character thinking about how she wants to cry, and then we show her crying, our internal dialogue and action overlap.

What we want to do instead is to use one or the other — not both. Continuing with our example above, perhaps our character wants to cry, but she's been told her whole life that crying is weak. We could have her express her deep sadness externally in a different way, like running until her body collapses.

Pitfalls to Avoid

- Avoid making a character's inner voice into a sarcastic wisecracker who won't shut up. Such a voice can be entertaining, but only if used sparingly. When your beta readers start to groan because they know exactly what the inner wiseass is going to say, that's when to dial it back.
- Be sure to reserve internal dialogue for a very few characters. Many writers successfully do internal dialogue for just one character— their protagonist.
- Do not use "... I thought to myself." This screams rank amateur; who but oneself does one think to?
- Avoid telling huge hunks of backstory via having a character "think about" or "remember" it.
- Avoid using internal dialogue to discuss something that doesn't serve the story. If it's not relevant, leave it out and get on with it.

How to Develop Your Skill at Internal Dialogue

A good way to develop your feel for internal dialogue is to get in touch with your own internal dialogue—the stream of consciousness that flows through your head, sometimes annoyingly, sometimes quietly and productively.

Take fifteen minutes and simply write what you're thinking. If you stall out, remember some recent problem or bit of family drama, and write your internal dialogue on that.

Strive to render your thoughts as realistically as you speak.

Write it. How did it feel? Read it over. What's it like? What do you see? When you turn to your fictional characters, remember what it felt like to write "out of your head."

THE CHALLENGE

Write a story or poem using some internal dialogue. Visit the photographs at the [bottom of this page](#) (*The Nook, February 25th*) for inspiration if you wish — or make the story based on your own ideas.