

The writer's camera

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The visual arts use various techniques to convey perspective and three-dimensional space. But are you aware that writing also has techniques for *foregrounding* and *backgrounding* information?

Imagine this scene in a film: a man offers a woman a drink. She accepts. Sounds boring? But what if he's just poisoned her brother, or we know that the man's roommate used the same bottle for a urine sample? We're bored by unconnected details, but intrigued by the larger scene, the one that connects to our imagination or experience. It's human nature.

How did you visualize the couple? Were they in the center of the screen? Was there anyone else in the background? I guess they were sitting quietly in the foreground, that the camera made no sudden swings and that you visualized none of the people or tools used to make films (cameras, microphone, boom, script, a director). In fact, the chances are, these thoughts never even entered your mind.

Yet, a real film has lots of equipment and dozens of people on set. The scenes are usually shot out of sequence, with more than one camera, giving the director a choice of angles and takes. What you already know about the difference between making a film and watching one can be used to understand the process of writing.

Writers are like directors, and drafts are like unedited film. In drafts we're often right there on the page with our subjects. Information – like the actors – may be wandering around, waiting for direction. Some characters that start out looking useful turn out to be irrelevant, so they get edited out later. Some relationships become clearer as the work develops. And you, as writer/director, are busy assembling everything needed for the performance. Filmmaking combines production with rehearsal – editing comes later – so that the director can build a story, using the cameras to record the result.

In cinema, the camera usually aims at the main event. In text, *the camera is always aimed directly at the subject of the sentence*. Once you know this, abstract rules like ‘use the active voice’ or ‘avoid the first person’ become irrelevant. Just focus your camera on the thread that’s holding your story together.

Managers are expected to make decisions on how to deal with changes in technology and markets. *They* need...

or:

Decisions on how to deal with changes in technology and markets are made by managers. *These decisions* depend on...

Suppose you’ve filmed yourself in the draft:

Next *I’ll* describe the three main factors influencing these decisions.

you can change the angle for the final version:

Three main factors influence these decisions. First, ...

You can use the camera to ‘zoom’ in:

Managers of scientific institutes are under constant pressure to keep costs down. *Managers in the Netherlands* are particularly keen to establish that research is not only practical, but also cost-effective. *Managers at ITC* are ...

Or ‘pan’ across a landscape (or through time, or through a cause-and-effect chain) or to show a group of elements or a contrasting pair of alternatives...

If you need to be on camera, say because you’re presenting your own ideas in a proposal to management, make sure you’re there. Otherwise, for example in the Materials & Methods section of a scientific paper, you should stay out of the frame. However, if you were writing a profile of, say, ITC, it doesn’t make much sense to use the third person: “ITC is a worldwide operating research institute. It’s among the leading players in its field.” (Who’s holding the camera?). Simply write in a voice that is clearly ITC’s: “We are a leading international institute in Geo-information Science and Earth Observation.”

Editing, the process of controlling the audience's perspective, is much more than correcting errors, because we visualize as we read (we may not visualize what the author intends, but we visualize nevertheless). The writer/director, working on a first draft, can approach the subject from any angle. In the final version, though, the basic rules of cinematography apply: focus, continuity, and camera control.