



Don't you hate it when someone butts into your conversation or adds commentary during a movie? Readers hate being interrupted. They want to immerse themselves in your story and stay there. Intrusions yank them out of it. It's like a commercial break during a television show.

The biggest problem with any point of view, other than omniscient, is narrator or narrative intrusion. Speaking to the audience was used in 18th and 19th century novels and in some modern Sit-Coms. The author interrupts the story to deliver his commentary, thoughts, opinions, or information, creating speed bumps that disrupt the reader's total immersion in the story.

Any time a character speaks directly to the audience, they are putting the narrative on hold to talk to the reader. Speaking to the audience is different than the character narrating what he sees, hears, thinks, says, and his interactions with others. Someone has to relay the dialogue, action, reactions, and thoughts. That is not the same as intrusion.

Let's identify intrusive elements and learn how to remove them.

1. Ideally, comments, thoughts, opinions, and information should be filtered through the characters, not the writer.

Omniscient narrators are able to be in every head at all times. They often intrude with their own opinion. You lose a certain number of readers with this method.

With other points of view, narrator intrusion removes the verbal camera from the shoulder or the eyes of the viewpoint character to take in action on the stage the character isn't aware of. The speed bumps can be low or high depending on the severity of the intrusion.

Intrusion is difficult to avoid. Stringent editing can fix it. Read each scene. If possible, have other people read each scene to look for intrusions. Pull back and look at what you've written with a jaundiced eye. Ask yourself if you've written anything the point of view character couldn't see, hear, feel, smell, taste, touch, notice, know, or do.

When you've identified the intrusion, it is fairly easy to repair it. Rephrase it in a way the character would say it or do it. Writers are frequently cautioned to show not tell, though there are times when the character has to tell. It is a fine, hotly debated line and one most



writers struggle with. Don't tell us someone is sad, show us. Don't tell us someone is angry, show us. The advice makes many writers throw darts at their manuscript.

2. Key intrusion words to look for include: as before, after, behind, believed, considered, debated, discovered, during, felt, figured, hated, inside, knew, liked, loved, noticed, realized, pondered, remembered, sensed, since, smelled, tasted, thought, wanted to, when, while, wished, understood, until, used to.

3. Showing versus telling is not necessarily the same as narrator intrusion. An example of intrusion would be:

Sam Malone, a dark, handsome, intelligent man stared through the window of his fortieth floor penthouse at the brooding LA skyline.

This sentence is simply awful, but you get the point. Yes, I just intruded with an opinion. If you write in omniscient, this is perfectly acceptable. In all other cases, it isn't.

4. Even in third person, a character does not think to himself:

I'm a handsome, intelligent, man standing in my fortieth floor penthouse. My décor is ultra-modern and shows I have expensive taste.

To fix the intrusion, the writer can show the character entering his building or getting off at the fortieth floor. The character places his keys in a ceramic bowl on a glass and steel hall table or hangs them on an ornate message board above it. The character walks into the living room, across the deep pile carpet, and places his jacket on the back of a white leather sofa. He can look at himself in the mirror (overused but effective) or catch a glimpse of himself in the glass as he stares at the brooding LA skyline.

He could notice a photo of himself and his wife. He can think about the way they used to be, so young, so good looking, so idealistic. He can wonder if she still finds him as attractive as he finds her. He can miss her presence in his swank apartment, one they chose together but he now occupies alone. In this way, you show the reader his world rather than tell them about it.



5. Another example is when a writer inserts statements for suspense.

Sally didn't know that Dick had other plans for her and that his plans would change her life forever.

Little did Dick know that Spot, so peacefully curled up at the end of his bed, would attack him in the middle of the night. If he had known what the dog was capable of, he might have put Spot in his crate.

These are extreme examples, but you get the point. Who is giving us this information? It isn't Dick or Sally. Some writers do this on purpose, to say, "Wait for it ... a tense situation is coming." It does the opposite. The author just told us there is going to be an attack in the middle of the night, removing the suspense factor.

The author could have shown Dick snuggling up with dear Spot, holding the dog close, feeling all warm and safe. Then Spot growls and wriggles away from Dick. The dog's fur stands on end. Cut scene. Next chapter. The reader keeps reading to find out what upset the dog. That is well-crafted suspense.

6. In third person limited point of view and first person, a writer often tells the reader things the point of view character couldn't possibly know.

Jane sat in the café, sipping a cooling mocha latte, lost in thought, a book open on the table. The man in the booth behind her stared and wondered why someone so good looking was so sad.

Unless Jane has eyes in the back of her head, she isn't aware that she is being watched. Unless she reads minds, she won't know what the man behind her is thinking. The verbal camera panned away from Jane and followed the man in the booth. This is either head-hopping or author intrusion, depending on the point of view. Another example would be:

Sally perched on the edge of a park bench. She closed her eyes, wiping the sweat from her brow. When did it get so hot? A man sat down on the grass, not close enough to be obvious, but near enough to catch her if she decided to run.

Sounds suspenseful, right? However, Sally's eyes are closed. She can't see the man sitting on the grass. She doesn't know why he is sitting on the grass, or that he intends to grab her



if she leaves the bench. The author thinks he is setting up suspense, but he is shifting point of view or intruding. The scene can be fixed by simply having Sally open her eyes, see the guy sitting on the grass. She can decide he is a problem and calculate whether she could run before he could grab her. This keeps us in her head and sets the tension. Will she go for it? Will she make it?

7. Writing in first person POV, a passage might read:

I bent over to pick up the note that fell from the boy's backpack. The paper was crumpled, from the kind of yellow legal pad a businessman would use. I unfolded it and examined the crabbed handwriting. A red stain colored my cheeks as the profane words registered. What kind of boy would write such a thing?

This is very subtle intrusion. Why? Because the character can't see her own face, so how would she know it was red? She could feel her face flush. The reader knows that a flushed face looks red. You don't have to explain it. These mistakes are hard to catch. A good critique partner, beta-reader, or editor helps you find them.

8. Another example is when the author gives the reader the reason for someone else's behavior.

Jane lifted the hotel receipt from the table. She held it up so Dick could get a good look at it. "And you were at the Savoy last week for what reason?" Dick turned away to hide his panic and formulate an excuse.

If the piece is written in omniscient point of view, this passage works. Otherwise, it doesn't. Jane can see Dick turn away. She might guess why, but she wouldn't think to herself:

Dick turned away to hide his panic and formulate an excuse.

Jane could see him turn away. She can surmise that he is hiding something and press Dick for an answer. Dick's lack of response tells her he is formulating a lie. When he comes out with, "It was a business meeting," Jane assumes it is a lie.

Jane can then call him on it by saying something like: "An overnight meeting?"



Dick justifies it with: “No, but it ran late and I was tired, so I got a room.”

Jane could top it off with: “You paid for a room instead of a cab? We only live five blocks away.”

Lie exposed and you have tense dialogue with a great zinger at the end. The fight is on.

9. Another problem is describing details a character would never notice.

Dick is standing at the coffee machine in the break room and Jane walks in with designer shoes and a dress that hugs her curves. Unless he is really into fashion or works in the fashion industry, he won't know the dress is Dior and the shoes are Manolo Blahnik. A lot of female readers won't know what the heck Dior or Manolos look like either. It is best to describe the dress and the response it creates within Dick (he is turned on by stiletto heels), than to toss in labels a man (or woman) wouldn't recognize.

10. Inserting cultural references and descriptive shorthand can be intrusive.

The author might know all about fashion or might throw designer names in to impress or to define character. It can have the opposite effect if the reader is frustrated by not grasping the reference. When a writer inserts cultural, geographical, designer, celebrity, and product references, she assumes her readers are familiar with them. When the references are lost on the reader, he flips the page. He might waste time Googling the reference. In order to Google, he must put the book down or switch screens. This is not the kind of page turning to aim for.

A reader forgives a few of these. If the book is riddled with them, and he feels the need to Google, you may lose him forever to Facebook and Twitter. You can use the shorthand references for inspiration, but you need to describe it. You can say: Jane had on a tight, knee-length dress and uncomfortable-looking heels.

This statement reveals character more than blatant references. If a man observing a woman thinks her dress is too tight and her shoes interfere with her ability to walk, it tells you he is either sizing her up as a potential victim who can't outrun him, or deciding that she would make a very high-maintenance girlfriend. He might like women who dress like runway models or prefer a girl who wears cargo shorts and sneakers. The way he describes Jane's outfit tells us a lot about the way he views women.