



## Inner Dialogue Writing Character Thoughts

Inner dialogue is simply the speech of a character to himself. *He* hears it and the reader hears it, but other characters have no idea what's going on in his head.

It's the same for us and our thoughts. Unless we reveal them, no one knows what we're thinking. **In** our worlds, however, even if we do reveal our thoughts, it's likely that no one hears those thoughts uncensored. Lovers may share most of what they're thinking, but for the most part, men and women don't share every thought. If they did, they'd be talking nonstop.

Most people simply don't tell what they're thinking, in full, to others. To do so would make them vulnerable, naked, without protection.

With characters, however, we get to listen in - we hear not only passive thoughts-the stream-of-consciousness patter that flows through the mind-but deliberate dialogue-a character giving himself a pep-talk or talking himself into or out of particular actions.

**Thought and inner dialogue give the reader insight he can't get from watching a character's actions from the outside.**

Inner dialogue and thought reveal truth. They reveal darkness. They reveal hope and dreams or resignation.

They reveal emotions or beliefs too painful to be shared with other characters.

They reveal the heart. They reveal despair of the soul. They reveal strength of the spirit.

**Thought and inner dialogue can be used to raise the emotional level of a scene.** When we see a mother comforting her child, telling him all is well, and then we see into her thoughts, knowing that in truth she has no hope that all will be well, we feel her love for her child. We see her own feelings and the need she feels to protect her child from a painful truth.

**Character thought can also lighten a scene.** A man who's holding back sarcasm or inappropriate humor may present a blank face to other characters but may reveal his irreverence to the reader.

What else can thought and inner dialogue do?

Thoughts and lectures to self, allow readers insight into a character

They allow characters to be differentiated

They give characters an honest voice

They can reveal character motivation

They can slow the pace of a scene

They can reveal a character's conflict between his inner man and the needs of others

### **How do you convey the thoughts and inner dialogue of a character?**

First, **the character must be the viewpoint character for a scene.** Unless you're writing from a completely omniscient viewpoint, which is quite unusual these days, you won't be dipping into and out of every character's head. And you certainly won't be doing so within the same scene. So be sure we don't get a thought from the dog when a couple is having a fight, not unless the dog is the viewpoint character for the scene.

Also, you'll only want to **reveal thoughts and inner dialogue that advance the plot.** We don't need to hear everything, just the good stuff. You could show random thoughts a time or two to establish the way a character thinks, but skip those kinds of thoughts for the most part. Give the reader thoughts that reveal the character and have bearing on the plot. In practical terms, try the following.

#### **1. Use italics *and* dialogue tags**

For traditional third-person narration, use italics to indicate a character's thoughts or inner dialogue. Clearly signal to the readers that what they're reading is thought or inner dialogue and not spoken dialogue.

Daren angled his head, taking **in** both Jessica and her sister behind her.

*They look nothing alike*, he thought. He should have known Jessica was not Julie.  
Also ...

Daren angled his head, taking **in** both Jessica and her sister behind her. *They look nothing alike*, he thought. *I should've known Jessica was not Julie.*

No need to write he thought to himself. The reader knows he's not thinking to someone else.

Note that the verb *look* is in the present tense. Because this is inner dialogue-words directed to the character from himself-verb tense can be past or present, even if the rest of the narrative is past tense.

#### **2. Use italics *without* dialogue tags**

When you've made it clear who the viewpoint character is, use italics without the dialogue tags. Readers will understand that the viewpoint character is the one revealing his thoughts.

Daren tilted his head to get a clearer view of the hoyden behind Jessica. *They look nothing alike.* He dismissed the two of them with the flick of a wrist. *And neither looks like my Margaret.*

Use of italics allows the writer to treat thoughts as if the words *are* dialogue, as if the

character is speaking to himself. So, we can use the present tense *look* rather than *looked*, even if the rest of the story uses narration in the past tense. The writer can also use *I* and *me* and *we* and *our*, even if the story is in the third person. Whatever you can do with spoken dialogue, you can do with a character's inner dialogue.

### **Keep in mind-**

While it's not required, **consider beginning thoughts and inner dialogue with a new paragraph**, as if it were spoken dialogue. Yet even as dialogue can share a paragraph with action, so can thoughts. Treat inner dialogue as you would spoken dialogue.

**Never use quotation marks for thoughts**, even if those thoughts are inner dialogue, a character talking to himself. Reserve quotation marks for speech that's vocalized. Readers should be able to tell when a character is speaking inside his head and when he's talking aloud, even if he's the only person in the scene. Plus, if you can cut back on distracting visuals, including unnecessary punctuation, you should do it.

**Be consistent.** Use the same method of conveying character thought and inner dialogue on the last page that you use on the first page. Consistency keeps the reader grounded in the fiction. Changes in method distract the reader.

NOTE: This paper is from an internet piece by Beth Hill, Freelance fiction editor.