

# Writing Interiority: How to Reveal Your Character's Inner Life on the Page

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*with Savannah Gilbo*



# Hi, I'm Savannah 🙌

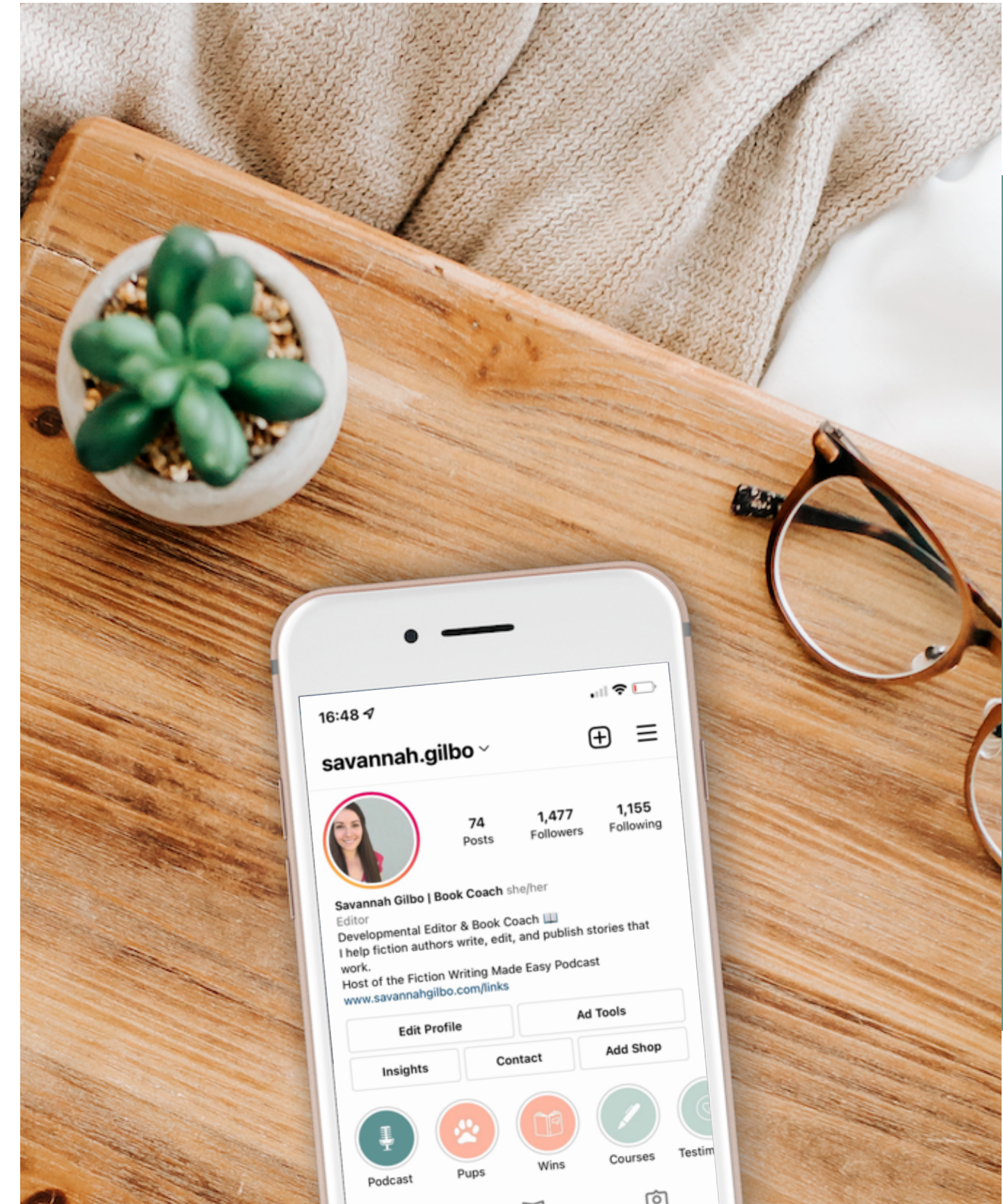
- Developmental Editor & Book Coach
- Host of the top-ranked Fiction Writing Made Easy Podcast (+2m downloads)
- I've helped hundreds of authors write engaging stories using the step-by-step, repeatable process I teach inside my Notes to Novel™ program



# Let's Get Social!

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Take photos during the training and share them on your Instagram stories! Make sure to tag me at **@savannah.gilbo** so I can re-share your post!





If you want to write stories that move readers, and create lasting emotional resonance, **you have to become a master of emotion.**

In this training, I'm going to show you how **mastering interiority** will help you craft a story with depth that engages the reader **emotionally** from start to finish.

# Here's Where We're Going...

3 Ways To  
Write Emotional  
Reactions



A Deep Dive Into  
Writing Interiority  
& Why It Matters

What Does  
Interiority Look  
Like?



How Interiority  
Can Add Depth to  
Our Stories



2x Case  
Studies



Live Q&A  
Time!





# How to Write Emotional Reactions



## 3 Ways to Show Your Character's Emotional Reactions

- You can tell readers what the character is feeling (naming emotions)
- You can show emotions via body language, bodily sensations, and physical tells
- You can show readers what the character is thinking in response to something external

# #1: You Can Tell Readers How Your Characters Feel

Many writers tell readers what their character is feeling. For example, "Maggie feels sad."

But as readers, we have NO IDEA why Maggie is feeling that way. We might know something "bad" happened, but why is Maggie sad, specifically?

Also, how would you show an increase in the severity of their sadness using just words?







## #2: You Can Use Body Language and Physical Tells

But this is tricky because lot of emotions can be felt internally, without any visible signs.

Emotions can also be shown via body language or physical tells without a person being consciously aware of that emotion, too.

This can lead to readers (and other characters) misinterpreting your character's emotions.

*“Jane’s eyes were dull and lifeless. She felt pain in her chest, despite her sluggish heartbeat. Her body felt like it was going to collapse on itself”*

Do you know what Jane is feeling? Jane has dull and lifeless eyes and she feels like her body is going to collapse in on itself, but...

**We have no idea what any of this means or how Jane is actually feeling. We don't understand the source of these emotions.**





Physical reactions are **visibly helpful**, but they **barely convey what a character is feeling in the moment**—especially if their feelings are complex.

It's also super easy to rely too much on clichés or slip into melodrama when you use too much body language, sensations, or physical tells.

This is why body language can only go so far—and it's why **you shouldn't rely on body language and physical tells to convey emotion.**

## #3: You Can Convey Character Emotions via Interiority

This is the fastest, most effective ways you can get readers to connect with your POV characters

**Being privy to someone's inner life makes us feel connected to them!**

Especially because, as readers, it feels like we're the only one who knows these private things.





Most of the manuscripts I edit lack interiority.

**A novel that simply describes what happened when is going to fall flat.**

It doesn't matter how dramatic the events are.

Without a sense of the why, readers won't have a reason to keep turning pages.

Plus, without the right balance of interiority vs. action, your characters will not behave believably.

# Interiority Key Points:

→ Interiority includes your character's emotion—and the processing of emotions



# A Deeper Dive Into Interiority



## What is Interiority?

- Is it narration?
- Is it anything but dialogue?
- Is it direct thoughts in italics?
- Is it different than writing emotion?
- Is it... something else?



Consider how movies and tv shows are made... there are actors, costumes, makeup, lighting, settings, music, etc.

**The only tool writers have is our words.**

But this tool is our superpower! It can reach depths that no other medium can—**the character's psyche.**





## DEFINITION:

Interiority is on-the-page access to a protagonist's thoughts and feelings as they process information.

"**On-the-page access**" means readers get direct access to the protagonist's **conscious + unconscious** mind as they process info.

- ✔ **Conscious mind** = memories, impressions, opinions, questions, etc. that are occurring within the protagonist's awareness
- ✔ **Unconscious mind** = repressed memories, automatic reactions, etc. that are happening outside the protagonist's awareness





## What does "process information" mean?

Information can pretty much be anything—it's the "action" part of the action reaction equation.

- Protagonist sees a dog
- Protagonist meets their new neighbor
- Protagonist receives a phone call
- Protagonist asks someone to be a movie extra
- Protagonist is interrupted during a big test

# How do we process information?

A character's **unconscious** emotional makeup (including biases, curiosities, fears, inner obstacles, desires, blind spots)

Gives rise to **involuntary** memories, urges, attention draws, preferences, thought starters, sensations, associations, instincts, recognition

Which contributes to their **conscious** opinions, realizations, epiphanies, decisions, assumptions, judgements, evaluations

Which leads to **next level conscious** reactions like questions, plans, anticipations, recalculations, theories, fantasizing, projections



**KEY POINT: Interiority is always partial!**

As readers, we interpret interiority very differently than neutral information.

**If your protagonist is neutral (and if their interiority is neutral) your story will put readers to sleep—it'll make your story boring.**

Interesting people are biased! They have opinions, values, preferences, wounds, unique worldviews, etc.

# Interiority Key Points:

- Interiority includes your character's emotion—and the processing of emotions
- Narration can be neutral, interiority is always partial/biased/subjective



Writing interiority stands on the shoulder of BOTH character development and plot.

- Interiority is rooted **in a character's perspective**, and no two people's psyches are the same.
- Interiority exists **in relation to something** (or someone). Our thoughts are private, but they're rooted in (or triggered by) something else or someone else (even ourselves).





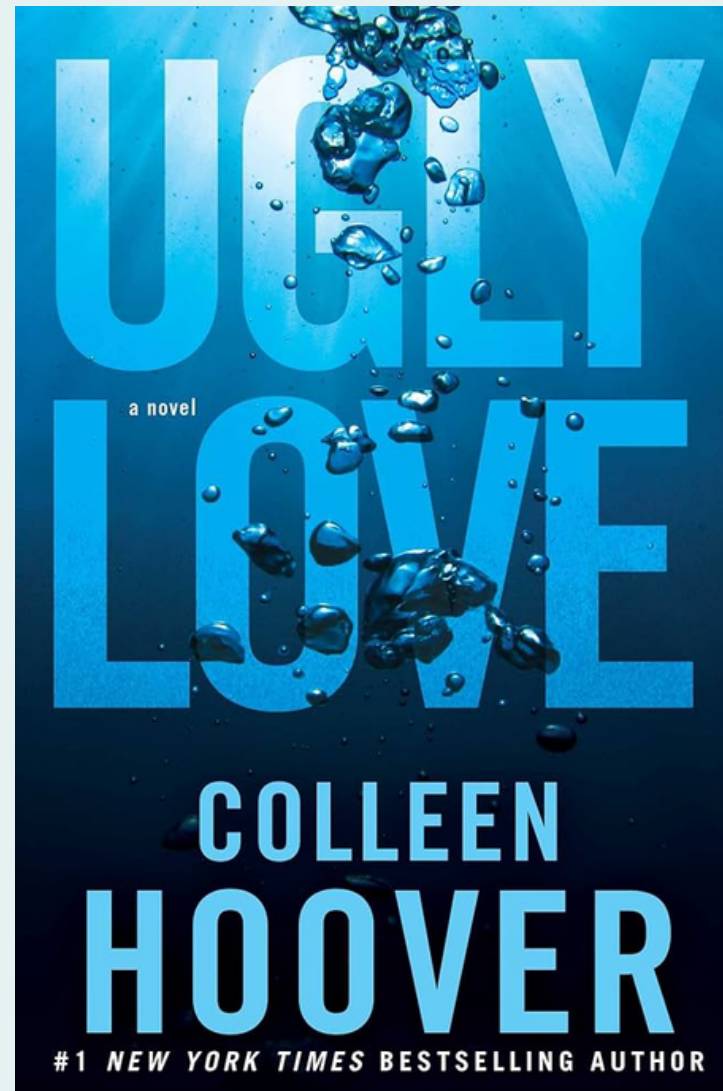
# What Does Interiority Look Like?

To determine whether a narrative passage is interiority or not, ask yourself these two questions:

- Could a camera capture what's happening (and could anyone in the world view it and report on exactly what's going on)?
- Is the passage neutral?

A "YES" to both of these questions means that the passage is not interiority.





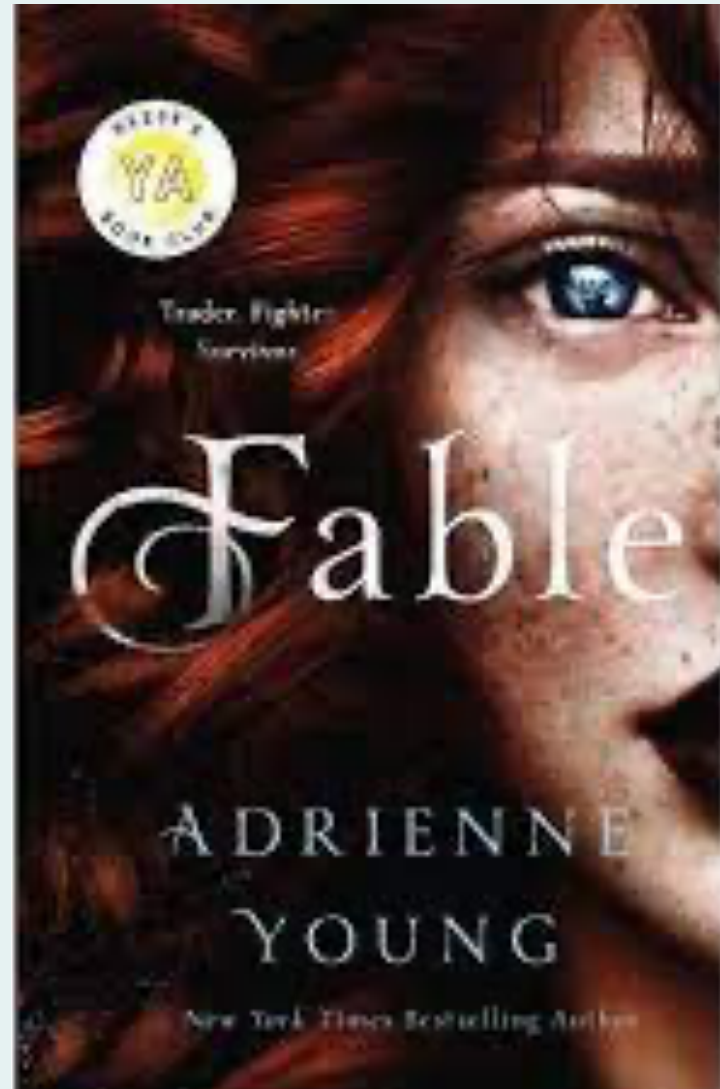
*Example: Ugly Love  
by Colleen Hoover*

"This place seems more like a historic hotel than an apartment complex, with its expansive columns and marble floors." **INTERIORITY (impression)**

"I find the panel and press the button for the eighteenth floor, then look up at the mirrored wall of the elevator." **NOT (neutral movement)**

"His legs are sprawled out in front of him, and he's leaning with his back propped up against Corbin's door. His chink is tucked to his chest, and he's snoring." **NOT (neutral description)**

"This guy isn't wearing any type of uniform, but I can't help but notice that his jeans and black T-shirt do fit him very nicely." **INTERIORITY (attention draw)**



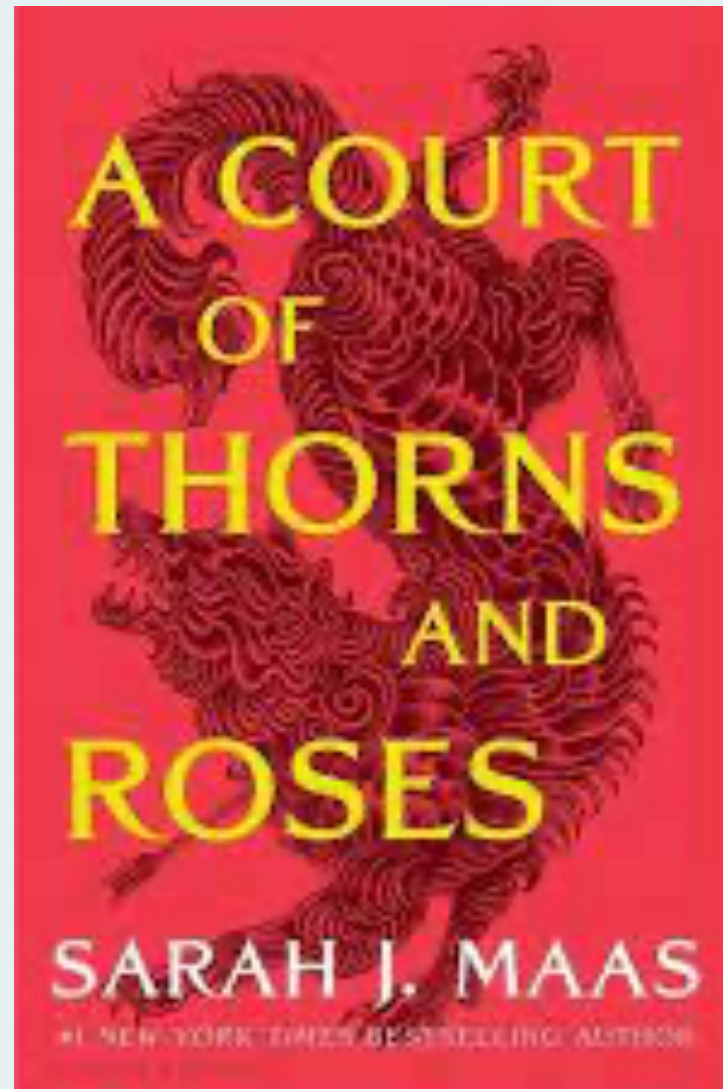
*Example: Fable by  
Adrienne Young*

"We were still sailing north, almost half a day off course on the route to Dern." **NOT (fact)**

"All four of them stared at me as a silence stretched over the ship, leaving only the sound of the wind sliding over the canvas sails above us. They were baiting me, pulling at my edges to see what I was made of. And I didn't blame them." **INTERIORITY (impression/evaluation)**

"He snapped his fingers and the coin flew into the air, over the side, before it plunked into the water below." **NOT (neutral movement/description)**

"They were trying to put me in my place. Trying to degrade me. Because with traders, everything was a test." **INTERIORITY (assumption/judgement)**



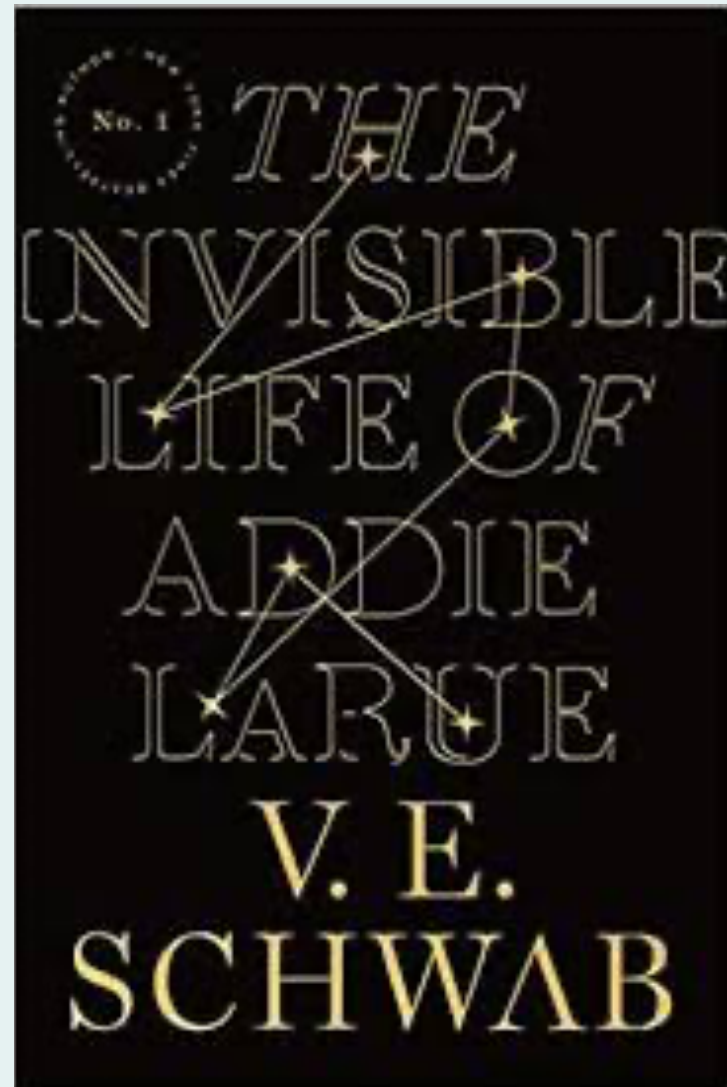
*Example: A Court of Thorns and Roses by Sarah. J. Maas*

"The trampled snow coating the road into our village was speckled with brown and black from passing carts and horses." **NOT (neutral description)**

"The weapons on her—gleaming and wicked—were enough to make me swallow. And stop a good two feet away." **INTERIORITY (instinct)**

"My stomach turned. Behind us, my sisters seemed so fragile—their pale skin so infinitely delicate and shredable. Against something like the martax, we'd never stand a chance." **INTERIORITY (evaluation/calculation)**

"My father was dozing in his chair, his cane laid across his gnarled knee." **NOT (neutral description)**



Example: *The Invisible Life of Addie LaRue* by V.E. Schwab

"The summer sky, where it shows through the canopied trees, is smoothed to a velvet black, marked only by a low-hanging moon." **NOT (neutral description)**

"Adeline rises, studying her hands, looking past the dirt for some sign of transformation." **INTERIORITY (intent)**

"She licks her lips, expecting to taste blood, but the mark left by the stranger's teeth is gone, swept away with every other trace of him." **INTERIORITY (expectation)**

"The front door hangs open, spilling light onto the path, and she can hear her mother humming in the kitchen, her father chopping wood around the side of the house." **INTERIORITY (area of focus/attention hierarchy)**

# Interiority Key Points:

- Interiority includes your character's emotion—and the processing of emotions
- Narration can be neutral, interiority is always partial/biased/subjective
- Interiority requires narration; but not all narration requires interiority



## FAQ: Is this the same as POV?

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NOPE! How much access you give readers to a character's psyche does not depend on the stylistic POV choice. You won't write more or less interiority depending on the POV you've chosen to write in. POV is stylistic choice. Interiority is about access to the character's thoughts and feelings.





## FAQ: Isn't interiority "telling?"

Interiority *can be* telling... But it can also be showing. A good story will have both showing AND telling—whether you're talking about interiority or any other writing tool. Giving us an inside look at how your character subjectively processes information is not optional!



# Why Does Interiority Matter?



## **QUESTION: What makes us (as readers) connect with a character?**

In a scene with three or four characters, what makes us connect with ONE of them more?


- Is it how they behave? (their actions)
- Is it what they are saying? (their dialogue)
- Is it how they look? (their description)
- Is it their role in the scene? (their position)



What someone says or does reveals a lot about them...

**...but why they do what they do (motivation), and how they perceive (feel + think = process) what they do, reveals even more.**

And being the only one who knows these things—since the reader is the only one privy to a protagonist's inner life—makes us feel connected to the character.



**KEY POINT:** The primary function of interiority is to help readers connect with your characters.

Novels are the only storytelling medium that **invite us into someone's mind** and allow us follow along as they make sense of what's happening to them and around them.

**As the character makes sense of what's happening and has an emotional reaction to what's happening, so does the reader.**

This kind of "on the page" processing is **what it means to write interiority**. And if you leave it out, readers are going to feel cheated.



If you want to write stories that move readers, and create lasting emotional resonance, you have to become a master of writing interiority.

**You need to show readers how your character is reacting to what's happening, or how the events of the scene affect your character.**

This is what will help you to evoke emotional reactions in readers and give them the reading experience they're looking for.



# Interiority is so Important!

- **Effective interiority establishes focus.** It reveals who or what a character is paying attention to in private.
- **Effective interiority establishes motive.** It reveals why a character is focused on someone or something. Or why they're doing or saying something (or not).
- **Effective interiority establishes intensity.** It reveals how much attention a character is paying to something or someone. It can show intensity growing or changing.





- **Effective interiority can reveal how trusting a character actually is** (on the inside) vs. how they act. It can help you show how trust changes over time.
- **Effective interiority can reveal a character's expectations** of what will happen (both before and after the conflict occurs).
- **Effective interiority establishes what your character wants to be kept private**, so that when the private thing becomes public, tension arises + stakes are raised.



On the surface, a scene is **a character** in **a setting** experiencing **conflict**. But scenes also show us:

- A character's **private expectations** (going into the scene)
- A character's **true opinions/feelings** re: the scene, people, settings, and themselves (including insecurities)
- A character's **private focus** behind their expectations
- A character **privately processing** the conflict/disturbance
- A character's **new expectations** going forward based on the conflict/disturbance (public and private)

## **EXAMPLE: It Ends With Us by Colleen Hoover (CH 2)**

I'm pulling the lid off the top of one of the shoeboxes when my cell phone rings. I reach across the couch and grab it. **When I see that it's my mother, I press my face into the couch and fake-cry into a throw pillow.**

I bring the phone to my ear. "Hello?"

There's three seconds of silence, and then—"Hello, Lily."

I sigh and sit back up on the couch. "Hey, Mom." **I'm really surprised she's speaking to me. It's only been one day since the funeral. That's 364 days sooner than I expected to hear from her.**

"How are you?" I ask.

## **EXAMPLE: It Ends With Us by Colleen Hoover (cont...)**

**She sighs dramatically.** "Fine," she says. "Your aunt and uncle went back to Nebraska this morning. It'll be my first night alone since..."

"You'll be fine, Mom," I say, **trying to sound confident.**

**She's quiet for too long,** and then she says, "Lily, I just want you to know that you shouldn't be embarrassed about what happened yesterday."

I paused. ***I wasn't. Not even the slightest bit.***

"Everyone freezes up once in awhile. I shouldn't have put that kind of pressure on you, knowing how hard the day was on you already. I should have just had your uncle do it."

## **EXAMPLE: It Ends With Us by Colleen Hoover (cont...)**

**I close my eyes. *Here she goes again.* Covering up what she doesn't want to see. Taking blame that isn't even hers to take. *Of course* she convinced herself that I froze up yesterday, and that's why I refused to speak. *Of course she did.* I have half a mind to tell her it wasn't a mistake. I didn't freeze up. I just had nothing great to say about the unremarkable man she chose to be my father.**

**But part of me does feel guilty for what I did—specifically because it's not something I should have done in the presence of my mother—so I just accept what she's doing and go along with it.**

**"Thanks, Mom. Sorry I choked."**

## **EXAMPLE: It Ends With Us by Colleen Hoover (CH 2)**

On the outside, Lily is:

- sitting on the couch, pulling the lid off a shoebox
- answering her cell phone, and then talking to her mom

On the inside, Lily is:

- surprised that her mom is calling
- noticing her mother's silent seconds
- trying to reassure her mother (about being alone) by sounding confident
- interpreting her mother's behavior and words; silently lashing out
- going along with mom's interpretation of events to not make things worse

KEY POINT:

Effective interiority **reveals a character's vulnerability** by sharing their private thoughts and feelings in a situation as well as what they expect, hope, and fear + how much they trust what/who is involved.

# Interiority Key Points:

- Interiority includes your character's emotion—and the processing of emotions
- Narration can be neutral, interiority is always partial/biased/subjective
- Interiority requires narration; but not all narration requires interiority
- Everything excluding dialogue is not automatically interiority (some is just narration)



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- Interiority includes your character's emotion—and the processing of emotions
- Narration can be neutral, interiority is always partial/biased/subjective
- Interiority requires narration; but not all narration requires interiority
- Everything excluding dialogue is not automatically interiority (some is just narration)
- Interiority can include direct thoughts in italics, but it's more complex than that




**KEY POINT:**

Writers have to dig a lot deeper to write good, quality scenes with interiority. It takes longer, and it's more challenging, but **this is what it takes to write quality fiction.**



## FAQ: Does this depend on your genre and/or writing style?

Yes—but only to an extent. In a mystery novel, a detective might spend one hour processing a clue or a crime scene. In a women's fiction story, the character might take a day to process what someone said or did to her. In a fast action thriller, the protagonist might react and process what just happened in a matter of seconds. But regardless of your genre, you can't leave this out!



Now you know **how to write effective interiority that will help you reveal who your character** is so that readers will connect with them and feel invested in their story!

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It's Q&A time!