A Quick Guide to Interior Monologues

1. Purpose: Why write an interior monologue?
   • How are you adding to what we already know about the character?
     o Are you making the character’s unclear actions/motives more comprehensible?
     o Or are you challenging our previous understanding of the character?
   • Your interior monologue should have conflict and resolution, even if it’s not a “story” in the traditional sense.
     o What is the problem? How do your character’s desires clash with the desires of other characters?
     o Good resolutions typically take one of two forms. Either the character/reader realizes that everything will change or the character/reader realizes that nothing will change.

2. Character: Who is this person?
   • What does the character want? What lies underneath all their actions – consciously or unconsciously?
   • Is this person supposed to be sympathetic? Unsympathetic? A mixture of the two?

3. Interior Voice: How does this person sound?
   • Our thoughts are rarely full sentences. More often, we think in fragments and use shorter words.
     o However, make sure your interior monologue is still actually comprehensible for your reader! Unless you are the next James Joyce, you probably shouldn’t take your fragmentation too far.
   • The first rule of dialogue is that people rarely say exactly what they mean – and this also applies to interior monologue! Just because we’re in our own head doesn’t mean we’re always honest. We like to deceive ourselves, to pretend we are better people than we are.
     o We will probably only be entirely truthful with ourselves during moments of crisis or disillusionment – and those moments will be all the more powerful because of that honesty.
   • Make sure the voice fits its setting (time period and location). Keep in mind the influences of things like gender and class on the way that people speak.

4. Perspective: How do you convey this person’s point of view?
   • Emotional coloring
     o As Futurama puts it: “You can’t just have your characters announce how they feel! That makes me feel angry!”
       ▪ Don’t tell us how your character is feeling. Rather, show us through their actions, how they speak, how they view the world around them.
   • What do they notice?
     o You ask three different people to describe a painting. The first describes the way the painting was created—the paint, the colors, the use of light and dark. The second describes the content of the painting—the story being shown or how it makes them feel. The third takes one look at the painting, turns to you, and says, “It’s crooked.”
       ▪ Different people see different things based on their personality and what they think is most important.
     o When they walk into a room, what do they notice about the room? About the people in it? About the objects in it? What is most important to them?
     o How do their past experiences affect their interpretations of the present?
Examples

Why then did she do it? She looked at the canvas, lightly scored with running lines. It would be hung in the servants' bedrooms. It would be rolled up and stuffed under a sofa. What was the good of doing it then, and she heard some voice saying she couldn't paint, saying she couldn't create, as if she were caught up in one of those habitual currents in which after a certain time experience forms in the mind, so that one repeats words without being aware any longer who originally spoke them.

– Virginia Woolf, To The Lighthouse

A cloud began to cover the sun slowly, wholly, shadowing the bay in deeper green. It lay beneath him, a bowl of bitter waters. Fergus' song: I sang it alone in the house, holding down the long dark chords. Her door was open: she wanted to hear my music. Silent with awe and pity I went to her bedside. She was crying in her wretched bed. For those words, Stephen: love's bitter mystery.

– James Joyce, Ulysses

Matilde: You were telling me how your life has gone downhill since you were twenty-two.
Virginia: Yes. The point is: every day my house is cleaned by three o'clock. I have a lot of—time.

I sit at the kitchen table and listen to the clock on the wall. Why do we make clocks that tick? So we can hear our life going past and know that we have done nothing with this moment and will do nothing with the next moment and it is hundreds, thousands of moments later and we have still done nothing.

I took the batteries out of the clock once. But it was so quiet.
So then I put them back.

– An interior monologue for Virginia from Sarah Ruhl’s The Clean House