

First Person Development ©

By: Victoria Rumble

First person delivery is a method of speaking in present terms, discussing and portraying events as an active participant. Participants can be participating in a vignette as if it is the present, or possibly reminiscing about events that happened during your life.

First person delivery depends on several factors, not the least of which is how well versed you are with the day to day culture your character would have been familiar and comfortable with. Since spectators sometimes aren't prepared for such delivery it can be helpful to have someone available who is not in first person to set the stage for those who will be conversing in first person.

Having a first person persona gives us an identity from whatever era we are portraying, and a reason for being present at various sites. As you put together your persona you learn to draw from the wealth of knowledge you have accumulated and react as your character would have reacted during that time. Our ancestors were very vocal and active in the war effort, and to portray them as women or men of leisure with no purpose for being does not do them justice.

A thorough knowledge of all aspects of history is not required for first person delivery. Diaries often discuss the confusing reports that circulated following a battle or other major event. News and letters were slow in coming, sometimes taking months or never arriving at all.

Rural families often were not familiar with the areas where such happenings were taking place adding to their confusion and apprehension. A first person delivery is as on-going as your clothing and other research – you add to and improve it as you continue to research and learn more about the factors that would have affected your character.

Success of first person delivery will in part depend on the setting. If you are participating at a historic house or site and assume the character of the residents of the home you should easily be able to discuss various events and conditions that affected them and that they would have been familiar with. Thorough research will let you know what your character should know, how they should dress, and what they would have been comfortable discussing. The site itself may lend itself to your delivery if it is commonly known to spectators.

On the other hand first person delivery in camp in a large re-enactment setting can be confusing to spectators and frustrating for participants. Rather than attempt a specialized delivery on a certain person who may not be known to spectators, why not consider a vignette based on historic fact such as the Lincoln/Douglas debates, a sewing circle, a temperance rally, etc.? With the conversation of those involved encompassing the same topic or situation spectators will more readily grasp what is being enacted for them.

Research is the key for first person delivery. Diaries, census, newspapers, obituaries, and other records can supply the information you need. Your character may be a well known person from history, a relative, or a generic character perhaps composed partly from fictional accounts but based on historical fact.

Remember that portraying a famous character may bring you in contact with others who know your character as well or better than you do. This is not to intimidate you from doing the first person delivery, but to encourage you to research your subject well.

Such portrayals may even bring you in contact with descendants of the character you portray who may have a personal slant towards your delivery.

A first person vignette may be a specific event or it may be a generic event which you have substantiated by research on a particular topic. For example: a vignette of soldiers in camp would not likely portray an actual conversation lost to history, but would instead encompass topics often found in period writings of soldiers in a similar situation.

Cemetery or illumination dramas can encompass vignettes pertinent to a particular area and involving characters from that area during the time period portrayed. Research can reveal characters from history and the circumstances affecting their lives. It is often helpful if guides set the stage for the “ghosts” to give their first person delivery for spectators free of explanations.

Your character should be able to converse fluently on relative topics – socioeconomic conditions for the area, occupations and crafts, religion, family, friends, births, deaths, or marriages, local events or happenings. This requires a basic knowledge of the social culture of the era, and an overall understanding of what the economy and political sentiments were like in your region during the time portrayed.

Developing a first person persona dictates that the clothing should fit the character. A rural Southern woman during the American Civil War would, naturally, dress differently from a wealthier city dweller, especially a Northern woman who did not endure the same privations of Southern women living in a blockaded country.

The difference in merely camping wearing funny clothing and recreating the history of an era and a certain people is the research which provides you with the information available to your character. Your delivery should be believable. For instance, if the person you portray was in their mid 20’s at the time of the war years, as you age too much to give a believable portrayal of that character consider becoming that character’s parent. The information would be the same, there would only be a slight difference in your delivery of it.

Researching period crafts and domestic arts of the period will provide you with a basic knowledge of the sort of things your character would have had at least a cursory understanding of. Knitting, sewing, millinery, quilting, soap making, spinning, weaving, gardening, joinery, masonry, shoe making, candle making, cooking, hunting, fishing, or blacksmithing, etc. are prime examples.

For domestic arts or an occupation take a 21st century interest and transform it into a period craft. For instance – if you enjoy knitting find a pattern and learn to knit socks to use as an activity. If you enjoy growing and using herbs, use that as the foundation for a period herbalist’s impression. Perhaps as a diversion from your 21st century life you would prefer your earlier century interest to be something totally different from your normal pursuits. You are as limitless as the bounds of your imagination.

In an era when many Americans had often recently emigrated a knowledge of what conditions were like in the country they left and what their journey to America would have been like will afford an excellent topic of first person conversation. A general knowledge of agriculture, literature, economy, politics, etc. can be likewise useful.

The following is a list of things you should be knowledgeable of in your first person delivery. It is not necessary to have all the information. You need not worry if some of them aren’t known to you, or hesitate to add in other information you may uncover in your research. It is, however, a good foundation to build upon in establishing your persona.

FAMILY HISTORY:

1. Your name
2. Your Date of Birth
3. Your place of birth
4. Your parents – are they living or deceased? Where do they live or where are they buried? What was your father’s occupation, religious preference, etc.? What were the significant events of their lives?
5. Your parents’ place and dates of birth

6. Siblings' names and dates of birth.
7. Siblings' history – are they living or deceased? Where are they buried, or where do they live? Are they older/younger? Are they married or single? Do they have children? What are the children's identities?
8. Distinguishing events affecting your character's life. Was their home lost during a war? Did they help found a church or school in your area? Did they hold political office or teach Sunday school, for example?

GEOGRAPHICAL HISTORY:

1. Place of residence
2. Be able to relate what conditions were like in the area where you lived, both before and during the era you portray.
3. Know the basic history of the town/city, county, and state where you reside.
4. When did your family arrive in this area?
5. When was the town founded? How was the town's name chosen?
6. Who were the earliest settlers? Where did they come from?
7. What were the economic standards of the area?
8. What trades or industry was available in the area during the year portrayed?
9. What rivers or railways were available to transport products?
10. How did the men in the area participate during any war fought during the time you portray? How did this affect the families in the area?
11. What outstanding events would your character have been aware of?
12. What prominent citizens lived in the area that would have been known to your character?
13. What were the socioeconomic standards of the area? Was its livelihood earned primarily from industry or agriculture? What crops or products were produced? Where were they sold?

PERSONAL HISTORY:

1. How well educated are you?
2. Where did you attend school?
3. What areas of study were available to you?
4. How well educated were your parents? Your siblings? Your other relatives?
5. What interests do you have – occupational, domestic arts, literature, etc.?

6. How well traveled are you? Wealth of your character would determine this to some extent. Did you travel extensively in your area or remain close to home? Did you go abroad? How often, and how lavishly did you live while abroad? Were you a farm family that never traveled past the county seat?
7. Are you married? When? Where? By whom?
8. Do you have children? How many? When were they born? Where were they born? Are they living or deceased? If the latter how did they die? Where are they buried? How often do you visit their grave? What customs would you have practiced with regard to visiting the graves of loved ones?
9. Health issues. Are you relatively healthy, or plagued with some malady? If so, research the illness, the causes, the treatment used, its likelihood of success or failure, etc. How did the lack of medicines through the blockade during the war effect you if your character is Southern?

RELIGION:

Religion played a large role in the lives of our ancestors. Can you adequately portray your ancestor or a known figure from history without incorporating this in your delivery? Wars, disease, and high mortality rates among children created a need for comfort that a much larger percentage of the population found in religion and the concept of being reunited with lost loved ones in earlier centuries.

1. Is your character religious? How did you practice your faith?
2. What are the origins of your religion? When did the religion become established? Where? By whom? How commonly was it practiced in the region in which you live? Who were the early religious leaders of that particular denomination? Examples: John Wesley and Methodism, Martin Luther and Lutheran churches, Joseph Smith and Mormonism, etc.
3. How widespread was the religion of choice? How was it perceived by the majority of residents from the region in which you lived? Were there particular prejudices associated with it? Did this cause you distress, or were you comfortable enough in your faith to overlook such reactions?
4. Do research to see if your practiced religion was established in the place in which you lived. Did you attend one church because it was all that was available at the time, and later perhaps have the luxury of having the church of your choice established affording you the opportunity to pursue it?
5. Who were the early religious leaders in your area? How did you feel about them and their practices?
6. Be familiar with the churches and cemeteries in the area in which you lived for the time period you portray. These may no longer exist but research of the area will supply you with this information. If your period of portrayal is early 19th century or later non-denominational organizations such as the American Sunday School Union, the American Tract Society, etc. would have launched massive campaigns to teach reading and moral behavior to America's youth that would have been familiar to anyone.

MATERIAL CULTURE:

1. What speech patterns were consistent with the area in which you lived? What clothing and activities would your character have been comfortable with? Dialects were different from North to South and region to region – you might want to be prepared to incorporate this, at least to some extent, in your first person delivery.
2. A more prominent family would have paid more attention to the social graces than a rural family. If your character is socially prominent put extra research into the social graces and material culture of the era.

3. Be knowledgeable of the etiquette of the day – in some ways it differs from that of today.
4. Dancing. Did your character enjoy this? Was it perhaps frowned upon by religious leaders? If your character would have had occasion to attend dances and balls do research on the origins of dance, and learn several period dances.
5. Music. Did your character sing or play an instrument? If so learn what songs were popular and their origins. Perhaps consider learning to play or sing them. Would their choices have been modern songs of the day or perhaps hymns?
6. Dining habits. One's station in life might have determined how much attention your character paid to dining habits.
7. Conversation. Rural families might have discussed basic topics such as weather, crops, availability of seeds, livestock, food, illnesses, etc., whereas a wealthier, better educated and worldly family might have also discussed books, travel, literature and the arts.
8. Arts. Knowledge of the arts would have somewhat been determined by one's station in life, though reduced circumstances would not have prevented the character from dreaming of pursuing the love of the arts. Perhaps the character longed to paint, but never had the means. Wealthier women would have pursued ornamental embroidery or more elaborate crafts, whereas a rural farm woman would have been concerned with the basics of clothing her family.
9. Literature. Books were a luxury for poor families. Even a newspaper might have been an expense the poor family could not afford. Wealthier families would have been able to indulge in purchasing the latest novel where the poorer family's reading material might have centered primarily on the Bible. If using these books or Bible in your impression put the effort into it to purchase one with the correct binding for the era. Remember that in earlier eras people tended to be far more familiar with earlier history than today. It is not unusual to find articles which quote Roman scholars and others during the 18th or 19th centuries.

OCCUPATIONAL:

1. How did you earn your financial support? If you are a woman did you depend on your husband's income? Has he joined the militia or army and left you to support yourself? What skills do you possess that could be used to earn your living?
2. Soldiers – you had a life before the war started, and providing you live to return home after the war you will return to that life. The knowledge of occupation, trade, and material culture would have been part of your life as a soldier as well. Example: An experienced blacksmith might have been detailed to do such work while in the army.
3. Use existing interests to learn 19th century domestic arts or skills to use with your impression. If you like to sew learn period garment construction techniques and actually stitch a garment at an event.
4. What terminology was associated with your particular occupation or domestic art? Do enough research to be able to discuss your efforts using period terms and descriptions.

REGIONAL:

1. Life was different on the frontier than in the East. Be familiar with the circumstances of your area, the degree of trials to which you were exposed and able to use them in your first person delivery.
2. How were your circumstances reduced by war? Have your prewar clothes given way to homespun? Have you given your linens for bandages leaving you with barely enough to continue housekeeping?

3. Are you familiar enough with the culture and conditions of your area pre-war that you can effectively reminisce about the carefree days before secession or before the Indian wars?
4. Are you familiar enough with friends and family of your character to be able to discuss battlefield deaths, deaths of infants or elderly parents, the effect of a certain battle on the surrounding countryside, etc.?
5. Diaries and other primary sources are the most reliable source of information about what conditions were like. Your second choice would be post-war reminiscences of people who lived it. Newspaper accounts are a wealth of information, but can sometimes portray a one-sided view.
6. What did women do to alleviate the suffering of the soldiers? How desperate was your character to meet these needs? How desperate were the soldiers for clothing and food? Were you able to send packages of clothing and necessities?

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