Examples Narrative Voices used in Screenwriting

(1) *Observe the World Around You:* Second person narrative voice type

You're in a cafe. You're sitting alone at a table, drinking a cup of coffee and reading the newspaper. At the table beside you, a thirty-something woman in a business suit types feverishly at her computer. You notice the woman's heightened energy, but you focus on your newspaper, the clack-clack-clacking of her keyboard becoming a sort of white noise that washes over you.

Suddenly, a cell phone rings, breaking your trance. You look up to see the woman staring at her phone. She gasps and puts the phone down, but it keeps ringing. She looks around the cafe, as if someone or something in the air might tell her what to do. Then she winces and, with eyes closed, picks up the phone.

"Hello?"

She listens. Her eyes open. She shakes her head emphatically as if to say, "No noNO!" and massages her temples and puts her hand to her forehead.

"I'm doing my best, sir," she says, somewhat desperately.

The woman listens again. Her eyes find her computer screen, and her jaw drops. "No," she says.

"You said I had until this afternoon. If you go in now, you won't have anything to present. You have to give me more time or we'll lose the client!"

She listens again. You can almost hear her pulse rising from where you're sitting. "But I'm already 8,000 words in! You can't! Just give me twenty minutes!"

She listens one last time, and then – poof. It's almost as if her energy flatlines. She puts her phone down. Gulps. Closes her computer. Then, looking totally dejected, she stands up and leaves the coffee shop.

Through a window, you watch her as she waves her arms in anger, unable to contain herself. After letting out her frustration, the woman runs, and fast. Soon she's out of sight.

(2) *Externalize the Internal:* Third person narrative voice type (the Omniscient)

as the screenwriter, you're tasked with describing what the audience will see and hear at any given moment.
Logistically, what you're doing is you're giving your film crew direction about what to create and how to present that to an audience. Said differently, **you're suggesting what your film crew should put onscreen for your audience to observe.**
Consequently, all of the writing in a screenplay must create an experience similar to that of watching a film. So, while in a novel you may be able to say:
Jessica sits on a bench and thinks of John. She misses him deeply. She thinks about the birthday parties, the Valentine's Day dinners, the walks on the beach. She cries for the love they shared and the love they've lost.

In a screenplay, if you imagine the scene visually, all you're really experiencing is:
Jessica sits on a bench, staring down at her feet. After a moment she begins to cry.
As observers, the audience doesn't know why Jessica is crying, since they don't know what she's thinking about. **A novel can take us inside characters' minds, but a film is much more external.** So, let's find a way to convey what Jessica is thinking through what the audience will see and hear.
There are many ways to approach this, but here's one:
Jessica sits on a bench. After a moment, she pulls out her phone and swipes through a series of photos: She and John at a birthday party, smiling; she and John dancing at a wedding; she and John sharing a dessert at dinner… She puts the phone down and begins to cry.
Here, the photos (what we see) visualize Jessica's thoughts, prompting her to cry (what we hear). As observers, we conclude that the photographs are making Jessica sad, leading us to suspect that she misses John.
You may be wondering: Couldn't Jessica just say that she misses John? Then the audience would know what she's thinking about!
That is true. But it is also true that Jessica is sitting alone on a bench. Who talks about their feelings, and the reason for their feelings, to no one? It's not a very normal thing to do, and outside of perhaps a very stylized film, such behavior would feel unnatural, drawing undue attention to the dialogue. Consciously or not, most of us would feel patronized.

Voiceover technique

Yes, voiceover is a tool that can be used to let us into the mind of the character, sometimes to great effect. We could write an entire piece debating the merits of voiceover, and perhaps we will another day, but for now, suffice it to say that **voiceover probably shouldn't be your go-to storytelling strategy.**
One of the strengths of the novel is easy access to characters' thought lives, while one of the strengths of a film is easy access to the senses of sight and sound. Inner monologues are more at home on the page than on the screen. Film is largely a visual medium, so it's often wise to play to its strengths. Moreover, many audiences love to observe and feel like they've figured out characters' thoughts on their own. Why rob them of the experience?
It's often more fun – not to mention, natural and economical! – to show us something that communicates what you need us to know rather than have your characters talk about it a lot.
In other words, visual writing.