

Point of View

Katrina Kittle for the Wright Memorial Public Library, March 6, 2022

Point of View

Point of View refers to two things:

- The style of narration
- Who gets to tell the story/be the narrator

Take Sides

- Pick a point of view and stick with it throughout a particular scene, chapter or even the whole story.
- If you shift the perspective, especially within a scene, it's called "head-hopping."
- Look at this example: Susan and Tom have had a raging argument, and she's stormed upstairs to pack her bags while he stays in the kitchen to pour more wine.

I didn't think it would end this way, Susan thinks as she tips the underwear drawer into the suitcase. I did nothing wrong, Tom muses as he takes another gulp. And yet it always seems to be my fault, he never sees my side of things. Susan pulls open the wardrobe.

- We have to skip back and forth to even realize who is thinking what. And where are we? In the kitchen or in the bedroom? And who are we supposed to believe?
- It is difficult for readers to "see" the action from these shifting points of view.
- IF you are using more than one point of view narrator, **it is customary to separate those points of view characters with an extra text break to delineate them by scene, or to separate them entirely by chapters (or even sections of the book).**

Styles of Narration

First Person

In first person POV, one of the characters in the story *is* the narrator. The character uses the pronoun "I." In first person POV, the narrator has access *only* to his or her own thoughts and feelings. The first person narrator can't know (and can't tell the reader) what is going in in any other character's mind unless that character chooses to tell her.

This is one of the most popular narration styles for contemporary fiction. The reader feels connected and engaged to the narrator, because the narrator is speaking directly to the reader.

Example:

I saw the herd of walkers swarming our outer gates. My blood ran cold and my scalp tightened. Where was everyone? Wasn't someone on watch? Did I have to do every damn thing?

"Daryl!" I shouted. "Daryl! Walkers! At the gate!"

I didn't see my best soldier, but several other of our tribe popped into view at the alarm call. Good.

Michonne's sword was no good from up here. I saw her climbing down, to meet them head on. My heart clutched. I had every confidence in her abilities, but the danger was real. Every time it was real. Every day I might lose her.

Before she hit the ground, though, the walkers started falling. One after another, arrows stuck in their heads. Gratitude filled me, warm in my chest. Daryl was on the job after all. As long as he was with us, we were safe.

Third Person Limited or Third Person Subjective

This narrator acts like one of the character's alter ego, recounting the story to the reader from this character's point of view. The narrator refers to the character with the pronoun "he" or "she." The narrator has access to this one character's thoughts and feelings, and knows the character's history, but has the prized tool of *distance* (both emotional distance and the distance of time and space). All events and actions are given to the reader through this character's filter.

This is the other most popular style of narration in contemporary fiction.

Example

Rick saw the herd of walkers swarming the outer gates. His blood ran cold and his scalp tightened, but he also felt exhaustion weigh him down. Where was everyone else? Wasn't someone on watch? Did he have to do every damn thing, be responsible for every person's safety?

"Daryl!" he shouted for his best soldier, the man practically his brother. "Daryl! Walkers! At the gate!"

He didn't see Daryl, but several other of their tribe popped into view at the alarm call. Good.

Rick saw Michonne climbing down, to meet them head on. Her sword was no good from up here. His heart clutched, both at his confidence in her abilities, and danger, the very real danger. Every time, he felt it. Every time, he feared he might lose her.

Before she hit the ground, though, the walkers started falling. One after another, arrows stuck in their heads. Gratitude filled his chest, the sensation warm. Daryl was on the job after all. As long as he was with them, Rick knew they were safe.

Third Person Omniscient

This narrator is the teller of a story he is not participating in, but simply observing and reporting. The omniscient narrator can read your characters' minds and had complete access to everyone's thoughts and feelings.

This style is not often used in contemporary fiction and can have the effect of distancing the reader because the reader is not connected to anyone one character.

Example

Rick saw the herd of walkers swarming the outer gates. His blood ran cold and his scalp tightened, but he also felt exhaustion weigh him down. Where was everyone else? Wasn't someone on watch? Did he have to do every damn thing, be responsible for every person's safety?

Daryl had seen the walkers long before Rick had and he'd been waiting for them to come close enough for his bow.

"Daryl!" Rick shouted for his best soldier, the man practically his brother. "Daryl! Walkers! At the gate!"

Daryl sensed the judgment in Rick's cry, but knew he couldn't answer from where he was.

Rick didn't see Daryl, but several other of their tribe popped into view at the alarm call.

Michonne didn't think twice. She'd protect her tribe and their home. It was her instinct. She knew her greatest strength was with her katana. No good from up here. She climbed down, to where she could be of use.

Rick saw Michonne climbing down, to meet them head on. His heart clutched, both at his confidence in her abilities, and the danger, the very real danger. Every time, he felt it. Every time, he feared he might lose her.

Before she hit the ground, the walkers started falling. One after another, arrows stuck in their heads. Gratitude filled his chest, the sensation warm. Daryl was on the job after all. As long as he was with us, Rick knew they were safe.

Second Person

The pronoun "you" takes the place of one of the characters in the story. The narrator only has access to the thoughts and feelings of the character being referred to as "you." This style of narration is rarely ever used in novels and is very difficult to sustain over a long piece.

Example

You see the herd of walkers swarming the outer gates. Your blood runs cold and your scalp tightens. Where is everyone else? Wasn't someone on watch? Do you have to do every damn thing yourself?

"Daryl!" you shout for your best soldier, the man practically your brother. "Daryl! Walkers! At the gate!"

The main thing to remember with POV is—listen to the voice of your characters. How have they come to you? Talking directly, or emerging slowly? Take your cue from them, and you can't go far wrong!
--Sophie Masson

Every story has the way it wants to be told. Listen. Experiment.

Why did the chicken cross the road? Exercise

- Answer in 1st person, as the chicken
- Answer in limited 3rd person subjective, about the chicken

Choice of Narrator

- Who tells your story controls your story
- Switching the point of view character reframes the view through which we experience the entire story
- Anytime you feel stuck in your work, try telling your story from another point of view

Considerations for Having Multiple Point of View Characters

- Always ask *why* you need multiple viewpoints
- “Don’t wait for the reader to fall in love”
- Avoid strait jacket rotation
- Choose who narrates a scene by asking “Who has the most at stake?”

“Gone Girl shifts perspectives to show us both sides of that story, and it’s a masterful manipulation on the part of the author, Gillian Flynn, to only gradually reveal the details so that our alliances shift as the story progresses.”

--Jim Dempsey

Sample in First Person, From *Hollow Kingdom* by Kira Jane Buxton (Grand Central Publishing, 2019)

I should have known something was dangerously wrong long before I did. How do you miss something so critical? There were signs, signs that were slow as sap, that amber lava that swallows up a disease-kissed evergreen. Slow as a rattlesnake as it bleeds toward you, painting the grass with belly scales. But sometimes you only see the signs once you’re on the highest branch of realization.

One minute everything was normal. Big Jim and I were playing in the yard. We live together, you see. It's a platonic relationship with a zesty sprinkle of symbiosis. I get the perks of living with an employed electrician in a decent neighborhood of Seattle, and he gets his own private live-in funnyman. Winner winner chicken dinner, which so happens to be a favorite of mine.

So, Big Jim and I were in the yard. He had a Pabst Blue Ribbon beer in hand—classic Big Jim—and was stooping intermittently to yank out a weed the size of a labradoodle. Things grow heartily in our state of Washington: emerald moss, honey crisp apples, sweet cherries, big dreams, caffeine addiction, and acute passive aggression. We also legalized pot to which Big Jim likes to poignantly screech, “Fuck yeah!”

Where was I? Right. A summer evening glaze of gold varnish coated our yard with the fat frog fountain and that shitty little smug-faced gnome that I've been trying to sabotage since I moved in. And then Big Jim's eyeball fell out. Like, fell the fuck out of his head. It rolled onto the grass, and to be honest, Big Jim and I were both taken aback.

Sample, in Third Person Subjective, from *Prodigal Summer* by Barbara Kingsolver (HarperCollins, 2000)

Garnett glanced over toward Nannie Rawley's, whence came the plague. She had started several new brush piles along the fence line just to gall him. She called them “compost” and claimed they heated up on the inside to a temperature that would kill beetle larvae and weed seeds, but he doubted it. Any decent farmer who'd spent his life in Zebulon County learning thrifty and effective farming methods would know to set fire to his orchard trimmings, but *she* was too busy with her bug traps and voodoo to get rid of her tree-trash the normal way. Compost piles. “Laziness lots” would be a better name for them. “Stacks of sloth.”

Earlier in the week he had attempted to speak to her over the fence: “The source of Japanese beetles seems to be your brush piles, Miss Rawley.”

To which she'd replied, “Mr. Walker, the source of Japanese beetles is Japan.”

There was no talking to her. Why even try?

Exercises that Focus on Point of View

EXERCISE 1—THE FAIRY TALE

Retell a fairy tale from the POV of a different character. For example, tell *Cinderella* from the POV of one of the “ugly stepsisters,” or *Hansel & Gretel* from the POV of the Witch, or *The Three Little Pigs* from the POV of the “Big Bad” Wolf, etc.

- Write in **first-person POV** as this character
- Keep the basic events of the story the same, but the reasons and motivation behind those events will be different through this new perspective/filter. **Make sure something changes in the reader's understanding of the original story.**
- You don't need to retell the entire story. Simply reveal a change to the reader by changing the perspective on one event from the story (for example, the Wolf could explain why he was huffing and puffing without going through the entire story).

EXERCISE 2—ADVICE COLUMN

Read *Dear Abby*, *Dear Ann Landers*, *Savage Love*, or any advice column you like. Find a letter where one person is complaining about another. Instead of answering the complaint, as the advice columnist would, write another letter, but this time have it be the complaint of the person who is being accused/complained about in the original letter. Reveal his or her reasons and motivation through their letter.

- Write in first-person POV as this person. Focus on motivation & conflict
- Be sure you offer a totally new perspective on the original letter

EXERCISE 3—SWITCH IT UP

Take two or three pages of a scene you're working on and rewrite the exact same scene from the point of view of a different character in the scene. OR change from first person to third person, or vice versa. Pay attention to what you discover or learn. Even if you do not choose to keep this change in your story, seek ways to use/integrate your discoveries.

Thanks for joining me! 😊

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