

## What is Point of View (POV)?

Definition: the “lens” through which the events of the story are seen, described, experienced

1. THIRD PERSON: “She/He, they, Joe” tells the story

A. **Omniscient:** God-like, often w/ a grand sweeping narrator’s voice (not a character but not quite author, either)

Advantages:

- \*Can tell more story and reveal more character faster, a larger “canvas”
- \*Author controls the story more
- \*Not limited to any character, hence, unlimited access to style, language
- \*Effect can be like a weaving, a tapestry

Disadvantages:

- \*Loss of intimacy; it can be distant, remote, essayish
- \*Style and voice might annoy, bore or worse

B. **Third person limited:** limited to one character at a time

Advantages:

- \*Not limited to one character’s voice (there’s still a narrator)
- \*Can cover quite a bit of story, event
- \*Can be intimate or neutral: “light” vs. “deep” penetration (Orson Scott Card, *Character and Viewpoint*)

Disadvantages:

- \*Seldom as intimate as first person
- \*Canvas not as large as omniscient
- \*POV character has to be present or there’s no scene

**C. Third person dramatic (“fly on the wall”):** focus is completely on the scene; the “camera” simply records events as they happen

Advantages:

- \*Direct experience uninterpreted by author (no intrusive narrator)
- \*Effect can be chilling (Jackson’s “The Lottery”) or simply neutral
- \*Most like movie, video

Disadvantages:

- \*No feelings besides those expressed in action/dialogue can be remote
- \*Clarity could be compromised (and author’s intentions)

**II. FIRST PERSON: “I, me, my” tells the story**

Advantages:

- \*Very intimate, up close and personal
- \*Possibility for lots of emotion, sympathy with character
- \*More immediacy, feeling that story is happening *now*
- \*Narrator is unreliable, letting reader make up her own mind!

Disadvantages

- \*Focal character has to be present at all scenes (can be awkward)
- \*Narrator knows too much—if she tells all she knows, no suspense; if not, then reader could feel info has been unfairly withheld (“tricked”)
- \*Feeling should be but *aren’t* presented, making reader feel cheated
- \*Character can’t die without a gimmick; hence, less jeopardy
- \*Narrator is unreliable, causing possible confusion

## ED'S POINT OF VIEW "RULES"

1. Don't settle on POV for a particular work too fast; you owe it to yourself to at least try others.
2. First person is often best for beginning writers . . . but don't get stuck in it forever.
3. First person should reveal POV character's emotions.
4. First-person narrators can't die (in a traditional short story).
5. Consider the advantages of using an "unreliable" first-person narrator (Twain's Huck Finn, Poe's Montresor, e.g.).
6. For short stories, one POV is usually best. Provides greater focus, unity, clarity *and* sympathy.
7. Multiple POVS work best in longer works, such as novels, and require lots of management to work effectively.
8. There's always a cost to switching POVs inside *any* work, so consider: is it *really* necessary?
9. Never (well, almost) change POVs within a scene.
10. Third person is best when you have a lot of *story*; first, when you have a really distinctive *voice*.
11. You can get almost as emotionally "close" with third as with first, but there'll be trade-offs.
12. All rules can be broken if the result, according to your critics, is successful. ☺

## POINT OF VIEW EXERCISE: Advanced

\*Write an original scene in all three POV choices below. Details will vary, but use the same basic ingredients.

1. 1<sup>st</sup> person narrative of someone who's about to do (or has done) an act you'd never do (an *extreme* act, such as violence, physical or verbal; not "going to church"). \*Must be sympathetic!
2. 1<sup>st</sup> person narrative of the person who's harmed by the action in #1. \*Must be sympathetic.
3. 3<sup>rd</sup> person <sup>dramatic</sup> ~~limited~~ (i.e., nobody's thoughts!) narrative of the same scene.

\*Present both characters equally sympathetically (or simply objectively).

Avoid adverbs and adjectives; use "said" (not screamed)—Strive for absolutely *no* judgement! Record just what the camera "sees."

\*Grand total of about 500 words for all 3 parts.

## POINT OF VIEW EXERCISE: Beginner's

\*Rewrite a brief passage from one of your stories (preferably one written this quarter) in three of the modes listed below (i.e., different from the original point of view).

Choose a passage of no more than two pages and strive for a *very* different effect through the new POVs.

1. First person
2. 3<sup>rd</sup> person omniscient
3. 3<sup>rd</sup> person limited with "deep penetration"
4. 3<sup>rd</sup> person limited with "light penetration"
5. Cinematic 3<sup>rd</sup> person (dramatic/fly on the wall)

Clearly label the passage according to POV used. (\*Also, include the original for comparison.)