

Point Of View Resource

1st Person

Everything is told from the “I/Me” point of view

Walking along the street I saw a man in a trench-coat. He looked like trouble...

The reader can only know for certain the thoughts of the point of view character.

You can tell us how they perceive other characters, but we can never know for sure what another character is thinking or know everything they know. For example you could write:

He looked like a man who'd had a fight with his girl and then tripped over a black cat on the way out of the door. I kept a wide berth as I passed, in case a stray jostle caused him to blow a fuse...

But you couldn't write the following example, because our POV character is sharing things they couldn't possibly know.

Walking along the street I saw a man in a trench-coat. He was trouble. He'd had a fight with his girl that morning then tripped over her goddamned cat on the way out of the door. He was filled with rage and I kept a wide berth...

1st person is great because we tell stories this way all day long (“Hey, the funniest thing happened on my way over here. I saw this guy walking down the street towards me. He was one of those weird trench-coat guys, right? And then...”). It's a style and a voice that's easy to adopt.

One of the complications of 1st Person in storytelling, is that your reader can only ever know what the point of view character knows. You can't have any scenes told from another perspective or clue the reader in on what's going on “meanwhile, in another room.” If you want us to know something about a character other than your POV character, you must demonstrate it through their actions, or through something another character says about them.

This usually works in a short story but is more challenging in a longer work.

Second Person

Second person uses “you” instead of “I” or “he/she”. Your character is talking directly to the reader

It’s an unusual one for writing fiction, but it can and has been done.

Here’s an excerpt from Mohsin Hamed’s novel *How To Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*:

This book is a self-help book. It’s objective, as it says on the cover, is to show you how to get filthy rich in rising Asia. And to that it has to find you, huddled, shivering, on the packed earth under your mother’s cot one cold, dewy morning. Your anguish is the anguish of a boy whose chocolate has been thrown away, whose remote controls are out of batteries, whose scooter is busted, whose new sneakers have been stolen. This is all the more remarkable since you’ve never in your life seen any of these things.

The whites of your eyes are yellow, a consequence of spiking bilirubin levels in your blood. The virus afflicting you is called hepatitis E. Its typical mode of transmission is fecal-oral. Yum. It kills only about one in fifty, so you’re likely to recover. Bu right now you feel like you’re going to die.

Your mother has encountered this condition many times, or conditions like it anyway. So maybe she doesn’t think you’re going to die. Then again, maybe she does. Maybe she fears it.

Because it’s an odd perspective, Hamid does a very clever thing by addressing the oddness right there at the beginning. The conceit of this novel is to be that this is a self-help book (which are very often written in this perspective). It eases the reader over the oddity of reading ‘you’ until they become comfortable with it.

Notice how quickly your brain began to substitute “I” for “you”? We know that the ‘you’ in the story is really the point of view character. And we understand that, by keeping his story at arm’s length, pretending it isn’t about him, this is probably going to be a slightly unreliable narrator.

This is a fun perspective to try out in a short story.

Further reading: <https://electricliterature.com/how-to-write-a-second-person-story/>

Third Person, Limited

This perspective works a lot like 1st Person, except the pronouns are different. We still stay in the perspective of your third-person character most of the time, but you have a little more room for a narrator's input too.

Walking along the street Bobbie saw a man in a trench-coat...

As in First Person, the narrator can only share the point of view character's thoughts with the audience. Everything else must be inferred or discussed.

Walking along the street Bobbie saw a man in a trench-coat. He looked like a man who'd had a fight with his girl and then tripped over a black cat on the way out of the door. Bobbie kept a wide berth as she passed, in case a stray jostle caused him to blow a fuse...

Because you'll have a lot more 'he' and 'she' in this kind of story, make sure you use characters' names just enough to keep straight who you are referring to, but not so much that it sounds stilted.

In the example above, Bobbie is female and the man in the street is male. But we also mention his girlfriend., introducing a second female character. That's why the last sentence must start with "Bobbie" and not "she", which would introduce confusion about which "she" I was referring to.

But I wouldn't then want to write this awkward sentence:

Bobbie kept a wide berth as Bobbie passed...

Third Person, Omniscient

This perspective fell out of favor, especially in US fiction, in the later 20th Century, but I hope it's due for a comeback. In fact, many British writers – especially humor writers—still use it.

With an Omniscient narrator, all your pronouns are “he”, “she”, “they” or possibly “xe” “ey” or “zi” (newer gender-neutral pronouns currently jostling for acceptance and primacy.)

In the Omniscient perspective, the narrator can tell you everything: what every character is thinking, what has happened in their backstory.

Current best-practices suggest not diving into the thoughts and backstory of more than one character per scene or chapter, but it's a fluid rule. As long as you can move from the thoughts of one character to another without confusing the reader or jolting them out of the story, this can work.

Just be aware that critique groups and modern editors have hair-triggers when it comes to so-called ‘head-hopping’ and you may have to be prepared to defend your choices.

It was the kind of morning that might have been created by a movie set-dresser: built for a confrontation. Two strangers walked towards each other on a grey, rain-soaked sidewalk that mirrored the heavy, bruised sky.

Bobbie warily watched the man in the trench coat as he drew closer. He looked like trouble. She didn't need any more trouble this morning.

The man hunched deeper into his coat, not yet noticing the small woman walking towards him. He'd had a fight with his girlfriend this morning and then, to make things worse, he'd tripped over her damned black cat on the way out of the door. Added to everything that had happened yesterday, he'd had enough. He was a man on the edge ...

Because we have established the narrator's omniscient voice first, it works. It tells the reader that you are going to confidently lead them back and forth among the characters thoughts. As with Mohsin Hamid's second-person opening, ease the reader into a less-familiar perspective.

Remember, the narrator is your point-of-view character (yes, character) and their voice must remain consistent. This is the one case where your protagonist will never be the point-of-view character.

Further Reading

The Write Practice's Ultimate Point of View Guide:

<https://thewritepractice.com/point-of-view-guide/>

Grammarly's First, Second And Third Person Guide:

<https://www.grammarly.com/blog/first-second-and-third-person/>

Scribendi's Guide To Identifying Narrative Voice:

https://www.scribendi.com/advice/narrative_voice.en.html

StoryADay Prompts & Articles on POV:

<https://stada.me/pov>