

Point of View (POV)

Probably the most important decision you make before you start a piece of fiction is whose point of view you are going to tell the story from. Whose story is it? If the story of 'Rebecca' was told from the husband's point of view it would be a completely different book. 'Wide Sargasso Sea', Jean Rhys' last and most successful novel, was based on 'Jane Eyre' but told from the point of view of Rochester's first (mad) wife, which makes us see both Rochester and Jane in a different light and changes forever the way we read 'Jane Eyre'.

There are advantages and limitations to all points of view, briefly reviewed here:

First Person POV - 'I'

Told from one singular point of view in the first person. This POV does not represent the author. The 'I' is a 'persona' – a mask assumed by the author. But in order to hold the reader's attention this persona needs a strong, individual and convincing voice.

The advantages of this POV is that it is technically the least ambitious – if you make a mistake it is the narrator's, not the author's, mistake. Also, unless the narrator is 'unreliable*', it creates intimacy and sympathy between narrator and reader. The reader is immediately on the narrator's side, even if s/he is not wholly sympathetic. Your character may express all kinds of ideas and perform all sorts of actions that you would be ashamed to admit to. First person narration frees your voice – you may use slang, bad language, bad grammar, make politically incorrect statements, etc. It allows smooth access to a character's thoughts as you do not have to shift into interior monologue.

Disadvantages are that you are limited to a single POV and therefore to what the narrator knows and experiences; you cannot enter the thoughts of other characters or describe what is happening when the narrator is out of the room. Extended reported dialogue can seem unnatural, but literary conventions allow some laxity here. There is also less suspense about the danger your narrator may be in - as the story is being told by 'I', we know s/he must have survived to the end of the book. (There are exceptions to this, as in when the narrator is already dead as in Alice Sebold's 'The Lovely Bones' or, if told in the present tense, the narrator could be dying in the final minutes.)

Using peripheral first person narrators who function as observers and commentators on the actions of others (e.g. Nick Carroway in 'The Great Gatsby' or Marlowe in 'Heart of Darkness') will only be effective if the narrator is changed by the action of the story, since s/he is character the reader identifies with most strongly. 'Wuthering Heights' is often referred to as a 'flawed novel' because it has two narrators between the reader and the action, and neither of them engage the reader.

**Unreliable narrators are narrators who cannot be trusted by the reader because they are lying, insane or deluded, e.g. Colin Thubron's 'A Cruel Madness' or Zoe Heller's 'Notes on a Scandal'.*

Multiple First Person POV (two or more 'I's telling story in separate sections)

This POV has some of the advantages of the omniscient narrator in that the author can present different views of the same events by using several alternating characters telling their stories in the first person. It is unusual to use it in a short story because it may seem too fragmented but can be very effective in producing irony, satire and in depicting group conflict. The epistolary novel, which deals with an exchange of letters, can be a good device for experimenting with voice, and modern examples include telephone conversations, emails or texts, but they tend to preclude description and atmosphere and can seem rather thin. 'Herzog' by Saul Bellow is mainly in the form of letters, 'The Boy Next Door' by Meg Cabot is written entirely in emails, and Julian Barnes' 'Talking It Over' is broken into three monologues all addressing the reader.

Omniscient POV (Third Person - 'He', 'She', 'They' with full access to inside and outside all characters)

In this POV, the author knows everything about all the characters and can tell us about them from the outside, while also having access to their history, and even their thoughts. Sometimes the author may comment on the character directly to the reader, or even address the reader. This was common in Georgian and Victorian novels - Austen's 'Emma' and Bronte's 'Jane Eyre' both utilise it. This is obviously the most flexible POV, allowing the author godlike powers. The disadvantage is that it tends to distance the reader emotionally from the characters so is effective for satire or to add irony. Salman Rushdie, David Lodge, Martin Amis, Nicola Barker, Jonathan Frantzen, Tom Woolfe and John Updike, among others, have used it.

Third Person Subjective POV ('She' or 'He' only from inside the character)

We are in the protagonist's head, seeing everything from his/her point of view, and are restricted to his/her perceptions (rather as in first person narration). It is more flexible than first person narration because it is slightly less self-conscious. It allows for longer sentences, more description, and is particularly strong for interior/reflective writing from inside a character's head. Virginia Woolf used it for her characteristic stream of consciousness writing.

Third Person Objective POV

An unusual, detached point of view, which describes characters from the outside. We see their actions but are left to guess at their motivation, emotions and thoughts. Hemingway used it successfully in stories like 'Hills like White Elephants' and 'A Well-lighted Place' and can be useful in crime writing. One of the reasons readers felt cheated by Agatha Christie's 'The Murder of Roger Ackroyd' was that they were given access to almost all the murderer's thoughts except those relating to the murder.

Third Person Mixed POV

The main character's actions are described from the outside, but we also have access to his/her thoughts, feelings and past. A flexible POV and probably the most commonly used today.

Third Person Multiple POV (two or more 'She's or 'He's alternating in separate sections)

Like first person multiple POV this shifts between characters with no linking authorial comment. Mark Haddon's 'A Spot of Bother' exploits this brilliantly, by giving us access to what each character is thinking about the others, while keeping the characters themselves in the dark. It has good potential for satire and humour.

Second Person POV ('You')

This is very unusual POV as the primary one, although it can be used in various ways either to address the reader, or another character (Lionel Shriver's 'We Need to Talk about Kevin'), or oneself, or to implicate the reader in some way. It's used effectively in 'Complicity' by Ian Banks to make the reader feel complicit with the murderer, in several books by Edna O'Brien (Irish colloquial usage of 'you' for 'I'), and by Jay McInerney in 'Bright Lights, Big City' to create a sense of immediacy and involvement.

There are other unusual POVs such as **First Person Plural ('We')**, used in Marquez's 'Autumn of the Patriarch' to represent the collective consciousness of a whole town, and **Third Person Plural ('They')** but these are for very experienced or experimental writers.