

Point of View (POV) in Fiction

Seeing and Speaking

Point of view determines whose eyes the reader experiences the story through. It's an important choice, because different points of view have different strengths and weaknesses.

FIRST PERSON

A story written in the first person is told by an "I," where "I" can be the main character, a less important character witnessing events, or a person retelling a story they were told by someone else.

The "I" point of view gives a sense of closeness to the character. It can be very easy to get the reader to identify or sympathize with your main character when the reader is seeing everything through that character's eyes.

Considerations

1. How much time has elapsed between when the character experienced the events of the story and when they decided to tell them. If only a few days have passed, the story could be related very differently than if the character was reflecting on events of the distant past.
2. Why is the character telling the story. What is their motivation? Are they just trying to clear up events for their own peace of mind? Make a confession about a wrong they did? Or tell a good adventure tale to their beer-guzzling friends? The reason why a story is told will also affect how it is written, and you at least should know the answer, even if it never makes its way into the text. And not only *Why?* but *Why now?*

Types

First Person Protagonist: For this point of view, a character relates events that occurred to them; the "I" is the main character, telling her or his own story.

I missed the bus that morning because I couldn't convince myself to get out of bed. It was just too cosy under the comforter, with the cat curled up next to me. I was going to have to walk all the way to work.

First Person Witness: The story of the main character is told by another character observing the events.

She missed the bus. She'd probably spent an hour arguing with herself that she really should get up. I could picture her there, curled up in bed with the cat next to her. Now she was going to have to walk to work.

First Person Re-teller: The story is told, not by a witness to the events, but by someone who has heard the story from yet another person.

She missed the bus. I don't know why; probably couldn't get out of bed. You know how warm it gets when you're all curled up in the blankets. She had a cat, too, and somehow a cat makes it harder to get up in the morning. So she missed the bus, and would have to walk all the way to work.

THE THIRD PERSON

Characters are referred to as "he" and "she" in third person. It is still the most common point of view, and for good reason.

When a writer is turning personal experiences into fiction, it is often easier to write in third person (even if they intend to put the final draft in first person). This is because the third person distances the reader (and the writer) from events. It is easier to write about personal things when you write as if they are happening to someone else. It is also easier to change events -- often necessary to turn reality into fiction -- when you aren't claiming that it was you who experienced them.

Types

Third Person Omniscient: The narrator knows everything; all thoughts, feelings, and actions may be related to the reader (or they may be withheld).

She missed the bus. She spent nearly an hour arguing with herself about getting up. *You have to be awake now, it's a work day. But it's so warm. Just a few more minutes. You'll be late. I don't care. Yes you do.* Curled up there with the cat, it was so hard to move, so warm and cosy. And so she missed the bus, and swore, and told herself how stupid she was. Then she started the long walk to work.

Third Person Objective: The narrator can only relate to the reader what is seen or heard. A good writer can tell a completely objective story in such a way that the reader is able to determine the feelings and sometimes even the thoughts of the characters through what those characters say and do, even though the thoughts and feelings are never described. Hemingway popularized this POV.

She arrived panting at the bus stop when the bus was already long gone. She looked at her watch and swore. "Damn warm blankets," she said. "Damn warm, purring cat." She sighed and walked along the sidewalk in the direction of her office building.

Third Person Limited: The narrator is able to see into the mind of a single character. Sometimes the point of view may zoom in so close to that character that the narrator begins to use that character's manner of speech and thought, and sometimes the narrator may step back to take a more objective view.

This point of view is sort of the "default" in fiction -- it is the most common because it can be used the most effectively in the majority of situations. If there is no reason not to use a third person limited point of view, then it is probably the best choice. In longer forms like novels, third person limited can be made even more effective by changing the character that the point of view is limited to. You must always be sure the reader knows when you have switched points of view and who you have changed to, however. If you are going to use shifting third person points of view, it is often best to change at a chapter or section break, at least until you are proficient enough at it that you won't lose your reader.

She arrived panting at the bus stop only to see a far-off glimpse of the back of the bus, moving quickly away. She glanced at her watch. It was already half past eight. "Damn warm blankets," she said, thinking of how it had felt to be curled up and warm in bed. She had argued with herself for an hour about how she should get going. She had stayed in bed so long she didn't even have time for a shower, and now she'd missed the bus. It was the warm cat curled up next to her that had made it so hard to get out of bed. "Damn warm, purring cat," she said, and headed along the sidewalk to work.