

Point of View

(Simplified from *A Glossary of Literary Terms*)

Introduction

Point of view describes how a story gets told, specifically, who is telling it, and how much that narrator knows. This is one of the most practically useful concepts you'll learn, because point of view shapes almost everything about how we experience a story: what information we're given, how much we trust it, and how close we feel to the characters' inner lives.

This idea became a major focus of literary criticism thanks especially to the novelist Henry James (whose introductions to his own novels, later collected as *The Art of the Novel*, discuss this topic in depth) and the critic Percy Lubbock, whose book *The Craft of Fiction* (1926) built on James's ideas.

Third-person point of view

In third-person narration, the narrator stands outside the story, referring to all the characters as "he," "she," or "they." Jane Austen's novel *Emma* begins this way: "*Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition...*". Notice the narrator is describing Emma from the outside, not speaking as Emma herself.

There are two important sub-types of third-person narration:

A. Omniscient point of view: "omniscient" means "all-knowing." An omniscient narrator knows everything: every character's private thoughts, feelings, secrets, and motives, and can move freely through time and place, following different characters as needed.

Within omniscient narration, there's a further useful distinction: An "intrusive narrator" doesn't just report events, they also comment on and judge the characters and their actions directly, sometimes even sharing broader opinions about human life in general. Writers like Henry Fielding, Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, and Leo Tolstoy often wrote this way. An "unintrusive narrator" mostly just shows scenes, without directly commenting or judging. Gustave Flaubert and Ernest Hemingway are famous examples of this more restrained, "hands-off" style.

Critic Gérard Genette made an important additional distinction: the "focus of narration" (who is actually telling the story) can be different from the "focus of character" (whose perspective we're following at any given moment). For example, in Henry James's novel *What Maisie Knew*, an adult narrator technically tells the story, but the story is written to follow the perceptions of Maisie, a young child. So the

"voice" telling the story is an adult, but the "eyes" through which we experience it belong to a child.

B. Limited point of view: Here, the narrator stays in the third person ("he," "she"), but restricts itself to what a single character perceives, thinks, remembers, and feels. Henry James called this chosen character the story's "center of consciousness." This technique eventually developed into something even more intense: *stream-of-consciousness* narration, where the story presents a character's continuous, flowing stream of thoughts, memories, and associations, almost like we're inside their mind in real time. Writers like James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and William Faulkner became famous for this technique. Some critics argue this style feels more immediate and "real" to readers than even objective omniscient narration because we feel like we're experiencing that mind directly, from within, instead of feeling like someone is telling us about a character's mind from outside.

First-person point of view

In first-person narration, the narrator says "I," and is a participant in the story to some degree. There are different levels of involvement worth distinguishing:

I. A minor witness, only loosely connected to the main events: like Marlow in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, who narrates a story mostly about someone else's experiences.

II. A smaller character within the story: like Nick in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, who tells us about Gatsby's life while also being a character within that world himself.

III. The main character, telling their own story: like Jane Eyre, Huckleberry Finn, or Holden Caulfield in *The Catcher in the Rye*.

The epistolary novel, told entirely through letters between characters, is a special type of first-person narration.

Second-person point of view

This is much rarer than first- or third-person narration. Here, the story addresses "you", as if you, the reader, are the one experiencing the events. Jay McInerney's novel *Bright Lights, Big City* opens this way: "*You are not the kind of guy who would be at a place like this at this time of the morning. But here you are...*" This unusual technique can feel very immersive and immediate but it's used carefully and sparingly, because it's a striking, unusual effect.

There are two more ideas connected to point of view:

I. The *self-conscious narrator*: Some narrators deliberately remind readers that they're reading a made-up story, breaking the illusion that events are "really happening." This can be done seriously, or for comic effect. Laurence Sterne's novel *Tristram Shandy* is a famous comic example. The narrator constantly interrupts himself, jokes with the reader, and draws attention to the fact that we're reading fiction. This connects closely to the idea of romantic irony.

II. The *unreliable narrator*: We usually trust that a narrator is telling us the truth about their story. An unreliable narrator, though, has a way of seeing or explaining events that doesn't quite match what the author actually wants us, the readers, to believe. We're meant to notice small clues, gaps, contradictions, and odd justifications that suggest we shouldn't fully trust everything this narrator says. Henry James used this technique often.