

POINT OF VIEW

Choosing the point of view (POV) from which your story will be told is the first important decision in designing your novel.

While this is in no way an exhaustive study of point of view, these are your basic options:

FIRST PERSON - The whole story is told through the eyes of one character, using the pronoun “I.” Most first-person novels are short, because this is such a restrictive platform. First person point of view is ideal for the detective mystery, because the reader learns all the clues simultaneously with the detective, and the race is on to solve the crime. The emotion, thoughts, actions, and personality of the viewpoint character are immediate and intimate. It’s all told in his voice. The problem with first person is that the point of view character is the only one the reader gets to understand deeply.

I should have known when I took this job it wasn’t going to be all cake and cocktails. In retrospect, I guess I did know. I just didn’t pay attention to that little angel inside my head telling me this whole scene and everybody in it was going to turn into nightmare stuff.

Michelle sidled up and leaned on my arm. She was a great leaner. In her sultry voice she whispered, “Mad at me?”

I wasn’t exactly certain about her relationship to all these people, but I told myself she couldn’t be part of it. Not the way she smelled. She couldn’t be part of that rotten group. “No,” I said, breathing her sweet, cinnamon fragrance. “I’ve just made another in a lifelong series of miscalculations.”

THIRD PERSON OMNISCIENT - “Omniscient” means all-knowing, all-seeing, like God. This viewpoint assumes access to every character’s innermost thoughts, feelings and motivations. It also includes knowledge of the past and future.

This is a wide-open, loose way of writing. The disadvantage is that it often gives too much information. Using this point of view to introduce four characters in the first chapter, for example, may confuse your readers. But proper pacing and balanced writing will render this an entertaining and educational approach.

On the last day of Henry’s life, he pulled into the library parking lot with a diamond in his pocket and a pounding in his heart. He was going to ask Lila Jane to be his wife, and he had been rehearsing his question all morning.

Lila Jane knew something was up with Henry. She worried about it as she waited just inside the glass library doors for him and his little Chevy. He'd been acting strange lately, and she was afraid he was going to tell her, as so many men had before, that he'd met someone else. Lila Jane felt that she was a fine woman and not a bad catch, but she seemed to have been born under an unlucky-in-love star.

Henry had just been born under a plain unlucky star.

THIRD PERSON LIMITED OMNISCIENT - This is the most conventional point of view, and the most powerful. With this option, you write from one person's point of view at a time. If it's Stan's POV, you know his thoughts, feelings, emotions—the entire body of his knowledge. Stan feels angry, his blood pressure rises, fists clench, but you don't know how Matthew is feeling; you just know that, as Stan sees it, Matthew is being very quiet.

When you restrict your point of view to one person at a time, the writing becomes stronger. You may switch from Stan's to Matthew's POV whenever you need to pass along information that only Matthew can provide. Switching points of view can be disorienting to the reader, so do it dramatically (never in the middle of a paragraph) and let the reader know immediately where they are and whom they're with.

Take time introducing the leading players on your novel's stage, and give them strong stimuli for action. That way your readers remember each character for his personality and for the unique way he deals with the peculiar difficulties that befall him.

Matthew poured himself a generous portion of Scotch and flopped down in the leather recliner to drink it. Vague lights from the city below his high-rise apartment filtered through the vertical blinds, painting light stripes along the wall that held over thirty thousand dollars worth of stereo gear. Matthew was a success in business, and there was part of the proof. He had made a million dollars before he was thirty, made his second million before he was thirty-three. He had an investment portfolio that still amazed him, he had a seven-room Manhattan apartment, he drove a Rolls. He had a butler. He had everything, everything he thought he would need to impress his father and make the old man sit up and take notice.

But did he? No. Stanford didn't care about Matthew, and that ground glass in the pit of Matthew's stomach. What was it going to take?

Maybe nothing, he told himself. Maybe Dad is incapable of acknowledging my success.

But that wasn't it; he knew it wasn't. His father, the prestigious Stanford J. Prescott of Prescott Industries, was punishing Matt, and he'd keep it up to his dying breath and beyond.

Matt slugged down the liquor, felt it warm his stomach, and rocked gently in the dim light of the room. There was nothing he could do about it, he told himself, just as he had told himself a million times before in the past twenty years.

The phone rang, and Matt looked over at it. There wasn't anybody he was interested in talking with, so he'd let it ring. He was enjoying his own company and his fine taste in Scotch.

DETACHED NARRATIVE VOICE - This is an impersonal, objective assessment of the scene. You can say what people do, but not what they think or how they feel. This, too, is a very restrictive point of view that doesn't gain your characters any sympathy with your readers. The best use of this point of view is to be interspersed with the others for a change in the texture of your book.

The boardroom was a silent, sterile room, with glass walls, dimmed lights and the eleven perfectly-situated leather chairs that surrounded the highly polished table. At the head of the table was the throne, a chair larger than any of the others, because that's how Stanford J. Prescott held his edge over the other board members. He was the king, he would always be the king, and they were not to forget it, not for a moment.

In front of each chair was a small, green-glass shaded lamp, a leather portfolio and a pen, all lined up with such precision that Prescott's secretary used a ruler to dress the room. Prescott always made certain the room made its all-important first impression. He checked it personally before every meeting. No stray hair, not a speck of dust, not a fingerprint. Nothing personal. This was business, and business was not personal. Business was cruel, and Stanford thrived on the precision it required.

Chances are, unless you're using the first person point of view, you will use multiple viewpoints in your book. This is fine. It is conventional. The design element comes in when you think about how to switch your points of view. Use rhythm. Minor, throwaway characters shouldn't be point of view characters. You can alternate points of view among all your point of view characters, or choose just one or two. But if you switch point of view, don't do it just once. Each point of view character should be heard from more than once.

You'll find a rhythm as you go along.

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