

Point of View in Literature

The most commonly used points of view in literature are easy to understand. Sticking to them when you're writing can be a very different story. Once you know the different points of view writers use, you'll find yourself aware of authors who violate the principles of narrative point of view. This will enable you to write properly, sticking to one chosen point of view throughout the story.

Why Is It Important to Choose a Point of View?

When you write a story, you need to relate to the reader in a way that is consistent and reliable. This is called the "voice" of the story. Strive to establish a reliable, consistent voice. This lets your reader relax and enjoy the story instead of thinking about how the story is being told.

Every time the reader has to stop and think about the narration, you lose emotional investment and continuity. Literature classes teach that you must choose a point of view and then stick to it.

What Difference Does the Point of View Make?

Each point of view has its advantages and disadvantages. For example, essays literature is best told from the first person, with a journalistic style. Most commercial fiction rings true when told from third person or third person omniscient.

Narrative Points of View

•**First Person:** First-person point of view is written as if the author is the main character. The author uses "I" when describing events, and is limited to writing about observations, experiences and feelings the main character can describe firsthand. First-person narrative brings the reader into the main character's mind, heart and experiences on a personal level. It also limits how much storytelling or description is allowed, since everything has to be described as it is seen or experienced by that one character. The writer cannot tell us what other characters are thinking or what other characters experience, except as observations by the main character. If you write a story in first person, you may get sick of starting sentences with "I" and may feel frustrated by the limitations on your story.

•**Third Person Limited:** Third-person limited is written using the pronouns "he" and "she," with the story being told alternately from different characters' points of view. The writer can switch from one character's point of view to another's, but the writer must limit observations, thoughts and experiences to those of the character narrating the story at that point in the book. Paul Zindel's *The Pigman* is a good example of this type of writing.

•**Third Person Omniscient:** Third-person omniscient allows the writer to tell the story as a narrator who knows all, experiences all and understands all. It's sometimes called "the god voice." The writer may choose to tell the reader inside information about various characters aside from the immediate plotline or to explain extraneous information that contributes to the story at hand. With the third-person omniscient point of view, you have a lot of freedom as a writer, but the nature of this narrative style keeps each of the individual characters at more of an emotional distance from the reader, since the narrative has more of a "story" quality to it.

•**Second Person:** Very rare in literature, this point of view treats the reader as the main character in the story. Other characters refer to the reader as "you." Descriptions are based on what you would see if you were in that situation. This narrative voice is generally reserved for explanatory articles and how-to books, but adventurous writers will occasionally pen a short story or novel in the second person. William Faulkner used this voice for parts of *Absalom, Absalom!*