Point of View
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What, a whole summit topic on point of view? Really? That's easy! First person: I drew the sword. Second person: You drew the sword. (and why I am telling you what you did? I'll never use that) Third person: He, she, they, or it drew the sword. Done. Or am I?

A quick note about the world

For this discussion, I'll need to distinguish between the real world and the fictional world, so I'd like to get that out of the way now.

Real world: Like it says, reality. Anything written about the real world is non-fiction (even if some of it isn't true). The author is writing a story to entertain, make money, or make a point. The audience is reading the story to be entertained, or to guess what point the author was trying to make and write a paper about it.

Fictional world: The world in which the story takes place. This can be a completely made up place, or it can be a fictional representation of the real world.

The various points of view

As stated in my somewhat tongue in cheek introduction, there are 3 main points of view:

First Person: the story is told by a character in the story. It's all about me (or at least, I am telling it).

Second Person: the story is told to someone. It's all about you (or at least, someone is speaking direction to you)

Third Person: the story is told about someone else. It's all about him, her, them, or it.

There's a lot more to it than that, of course. There are a lot of POV terms out there, and I wanted to make this definitive, but even my references don't agree. So, I'm going to pick a set of terms and work with those. If you call 3rd person outer limited something else, so be it.

First Person is the most straight-forward, so we will start there.

First Person: Who is "I"?

I ran down the Street of Travellers. Several of the town guards were chasing me. They didn't understand that I had only taken back what was mine, and I didn't have time to explain it to them. I ducked into an alley, looking for a place to hide.

I'd like to point out that I've never even been to Dargon, let alone been chased by the guards. So, it's important to note that "I" is not the real world author of the story. "I" is a character in the story, from whose perspective the story is told.

So, how does an author decide who should be "I"? There are a number of options for narrator. "I" can be the protagonist of the story. "I" can be a companion to the protagonist, or an observer. All have their advantages and disadvantages. Using the protagonist can help your reader get into that character's head more effectively. The danger, though, is if your protagonist is supposed to be impressive in some way. Then, having that person tell the story may make them appear arrogant. Then, a different character's perspective might be a better option. As Sherry Szeman points out, imagine if the Sherlock Holmes stories were told from Holmes' point of view rather than Watson's. Then instead of sharing Watson's awe at Holmes' genius, the reader might simply be annoyed at how impressed Holmes is with himself. Another advantage of the companion or outsider, is that person can serve as the innocent or novice, thus giving a valid reason for explaining things that the protagonist might consider as obvious.

Really, though, the more important question in first person is why is "I" telling this story (and to whom, but we'll get to that in second person). One of the more common approaches is to use a framing story in third person, with one of the characters in the framing story becoming the first person narrator. Then the framing story gives the motivation for the storytelling. Another option is to reveal to whom the first person character is speaking in the story, usually at the end, which again should show the motivation. And yet another choice is to have the story come from the first person character's journal, where the motivation is simply diary keeping.

Along with why, the author needs to consider how the reader will react to the information that the narrator is presenting, and particularly how the readers will feel about that character because of that information.

Another important question to answer is "when?" Is the narrator telling the whole story from a point in time after the story ends? If so, you end up with something similar to omniscient in third person, because the narrator's knowledge is not limited to what they know at the time of he story. One way to limit this knowledge is to tell the story in pieces, such as through a series of conversations or letters.

The last question to answer for first person is, can we trust "I"? Is the first person narrator reliable or unreliable? A reliable narrator will tell the truth to the best of their knowledge. What they say might not be ultimately true, but they believe it to be true (or

should) at the time of the telling. An unreliable narrator is obscuring the facts or outright lying for some reason. That reason might be to show himself in a better light, to hide his own guilt, or to avoid facing an unpleasant fact. In my example above, did the stolen object really belong to the narrator or not?

First person is typically used less often than third person in fantasy fiction. I believe there are several reasons for this. The first is the limitation to a single character's perspective. Particularly for the size of stories we write, it is much easier to switch to a different character's perspective in third person than in first. Even if only one character's perspective, there are additional challenges to writing in first person. One is, as mentioned above determining why (and to whom) the character is telling the story. Another, perhaps more challenging obstacle, is having to use that character's actual voice, writing in the way that character would speak or write.

To summarize some important rules about first person:

1. All of the information presented has to be something the narrator knows at the time the story is being told.
2. The narrator needs a reason for telling the story
3. A reliable narrator can't withhold information
4. An unreliable narrator has to have a reason for withholding information (not just "because the author wanted to")

Second Person: Who is "you"?

Second person is definitely the least common of the points of view in fiction. Very rarely will an entire story be told in second person, although there are examples (such as the novel *Bright Lights, Big City*). In fiction, "you" is the person or people to whom the story is being told. In the real world, then, "you" is simply the reader. In the fictional world, though, "you" can be anyone.

Some options for "you":

- A main character
    - Someone the author wants the reader to have a strong connection to
    - Someone in a story told to them after the fact, for instance to an amnesiac
    - Someone in a story where it doesn't matter who the "you" specifically is (e.g. someone in a very strange situation: *You wake up in a small, dark room.*)
- Another character in the story. (Near the end of Zalezny's Amber series, we find out that the main character has been telling this story to his son, who actually had a small role in the middle of the story)
- Implied characters (who may be revealed to be actual at the end)
    - A psychiatrist

    - A policeman
    - A judge or jury
    - The next victim
- Humanity in general
- The actual reader, in the sense of a true authorial intrusion. "It's important to point out, dear reader...". This one is a bit archaic, though.

If there is going to be a second person POV in your story, it's important to decide who that "you" is, and keep that consistent throughout the story. As in first person, it's also important to decide who is telling the story, and why.

Third Person

Third person is the most common POV in modern fiction. It has the advantage of not needing an explanation. There is no "I" telling the story, or "you" listening to the story, other than the author and the readers in the real word. It also has the advantage of a variety of perspectives, although it is important to decide which perspective or perspectives to use, and to remain true to that.

The first thing to decide is: omniscient, or limited? As the author, you are all-seeing in the fictional world that you create. You know everything that is going on everywhere, including how all the characters are feeling and what their motivations are. The question is, how much of your power do you want to share with your readers. So, omniscient might seem easy, because you can show your reader what everyone is thinking. The disadvantages of omniscient are that it becomes difficult for the reader to identify with a particular character, and it makes the reader feel like they are jumping around.

There are two types of limited point of view, outer and inner. Outer limited POV takes the perspective of a TV camera, or a fly on the wall. All of the actions are shown, but the reader doesn't get to see what is going on inside anyone's head. All of the characters' thoughts and feelings have to be demonstrated through their words and actions.

Inner limited takes the perspective of a single character. In many ways it is like first person, in that the reader gets to see a single character's perspective, and gets to know what that person is thinking and feeling. As Valerie Vogrin puts it, the story is “filtered through the consciousness” of that character. Inner limited provides a little less emotional attachment to the character than first person, but it provides the advantage of not having to explain why the character is presenting the information, or how the readers will feel about the character because of the information. Nor does the writer have to use the "voice" of that character. Inner limited does not offer the advantage of an unreliable narrator, though. Their first person narrator can lie to his audience, but the writer shouldn't lie to the reader.

Point of View and Perspective

These are two often confusing terms, even the references disagree on them. This paper so far has focused on point of view (in the sense of 1st/2nd/3rd person), although the subject of perspective has come up, both directly and indirectly. Perspective is the answer to the question: Who? In first and second person, the perspective was simply who the narrator and audience were. In inner limited third person, the perspective is the character whose thoughts and feelings are being shown.

According to some references, if I'm in inner limited and telling about a thief's thoughts and feelings, and seeing what that thief is seeing, but then I change and start showing what the guard chasing the thief is feeling, I haven't changed POV. I am still in inner limited 3rd person, but I have changed perspective. Others state that those are two different points of view, the thief's the guard's. It's strictly semantics, though. For the next two sections, I'll use "perspective" to describe changing the character only.

Stories with Multiple Perspectives

It is fairly common to tell a story from more than one perspective. The thief and guard above provide a good example for this. For a while the reader is riding along with the thief, and then moves over to the guard. This can be a very effective tool, but it can also hurt your story if done haphazardly. You run the risk of confusing or frustrating your readers, especially if you change perspective too often. Section breaks should be used to indicate the change, and you should have a good reason for switching. You also should avoid the "cameo" perspective, where only a very short section of the story is presented from a particular person's perspective.

Stories with Multiple Points of View

This is different than multiple perspectives. In this case you are changing from, for instance, 3rd person to 1st person. One way to do this is, again, section breaks. A good example of this is a 3rd person framing story with a 1st person central story Another way to do it, typically only with second person or 3rd person omniscient, is to let the other POV drift in, such as near the end of a murder story when we discover that the accused killer is talking to a judge. Again, it is important not to shift around too much, and to have a good reason when you do shift.

What Can You Do with Point of View

Some people think that the answer to which point of view to select, whether to use more than one POV or perspective, and which character(s) to use for the POV is whatever the

writer wants to do. Of course, that's true to a certain extent, but those choices will have a huge impact on how your story turns out, so it's important to consider the options carefully.

Point of view will influence many aspects of your story, including:

Developing Characters: POV can give your readers insight into the thoughts and feelings of one or more characters, as well as showing how those characters feel about other characters in the story. Even the way your 1st person character "speaks" to the reader helps develop that character.

Influencing how your reader feels about a character: This can be through the opinions of your POV character, or directly through the thoughts and actions of the POV character.

Controlling the flow of information: Your POV affects how your readers gain information. Should they know everything? Select 3rd person omniscient. Only the facts available to one person: 1st person, or 3rd person inner limited is your answer. Do you want to give them mis-information? Try 1st person with an unreliable narrator.

Setting the tone of the story: What do you want the tone or the feel of the story to be? Who is telling the story will play a big part in that.

Showing the sense of urgency: Giving your reader access to the thoughts and feelings of one or more characters can add greatly to the dramatic tension.

I'm certain there are *many* other ways that POV will affect your story. It's an important and often overlooked item in the writer's toolbox.

References:

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Mastering Point of View, 2001, by Sherri Szeman

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