

Which Point of View Is Best For Your Novel?

By Samuel Hall

Point of view (POV) is the lens through which readers "see" the story. Its importance cannot be overstated. Depending on who's telling it, any story will come out differently. Moreover, it's not only beginning writers who struggle with point of view.



Writers must determine the best narrator(s) to tell their story. How will you decide?

- The person closest to the protagonist is in the best position to witness key events (as in *The Great Gatsby*).
- Which person best personifies theme-what the story is all about?
- Which character can best learn from what happens?
- Who will be most changed by those events?

Most fiction writers use third-person POV. This unknown outsider doesn't participate in the action but makes the thoughts and motivations of every character open to the reader, which many readers prefer.

Third-person point of view has several variations: In third-person limited, the reader enters only one character's mind, either throughout the entire work or in a specific section. One advantage is that the narrator can reveal information the character wouldn't admit.

Third-person objective, aka fly-on-the-wall viewpoint, avoids going into any mind at all. The reader sees only what any observer might see and hear.

First person, the I-me-we-us approach, brings the reader into the middle of the action. That can be good or bad. My first novel was a personal transformation story, which needed a more intimate relationship with the world than what I was getting with third-person. Once I began to write from my protagonist's POV, in first person, she gained dimension and complexity with each peck of my doubtful fingers.

A protagonist who is more real and knowable - isn't that what we want? Well, yes, but remember that any viewpoint approach brings its own set of problems. In first person POV, the reader must deal with a narrator, who - being a character - participates in the action of the story.

Another mixed bag. Some caveats:

- Readers learn things only when the POV character does.
- First-person differs from third-person limited in that the character's voice is what readers hear in the descriptive passages. Thus, the narrator could

unintentionally mislead the reader through bias, misunderstanding, or ignorance.

- There will be no helpful explanations from the author.

Omniscient POV is told from an all-seeing omnipotent viewpoint. It's been labelled confusing and undisciplined. Undisciplined it is not. More often, it's simply used incorrectly. Pluses and minuses are:

- The thoughts of every character are open to the reader.
- The omniscient narrator can give the reader essential information not available to any of the characters.
- It gets the reader involved in every character's motivations; but it opens up a disconnect with all the characters.
- Readers may lose track of which character they're to identify with.
- Requires that each character have a distinctive voice so readers are never at a loss as to whose head they're in at the moment.
- Omniscient works for thrillers, but not mystery fiction - can't reveal what the suspects are thinking!

So which point of view is right for your novel? Now that you understand the different types, you can experiment to decide which works best for you.

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