

Point of View



DEFINITION

What is point of view? Here's a quick and simple definition:

Point of view refers to the perspective that the narrator holds in relation to the events of the story. The three primary points of view are **first person**, in which the narrator tells a story from their own perspective ("I went to the store"); **second person**, in which the narrator tells a story about you, the reader or viewer ("You went to the store"); and **third person**, in which the narrator tells a story about other people ("He went to the store"). Each point of view creates a different experience for the reader, because, in each point of view, different types and amounts of information are available to the reader about the story's events and characters.

Some additional key details about point of view:

- Each different point of view has its own specific qualities that influence the narrative. It's up to the author to choose which point of view is best for narrating the story he or she is writing.
- Second person point of view is extremely rare in literature. The vast majority of stories are written in either the first or third person.
- You may hear "point of view" referred to simply as "perspective." This isn't wrong, it's just another way of referring to the same thing.

The Three "Modes" of Point of View

Stories can be told from one of three main points of view: first person, second person, or third person. Each of the different modes offers an author particular options and benefits, and the point of view that an author chooses will have a tremendous impact on the way that a reader engages with a story.

First Person Point of View

In first person point of view, the narrator tells the story from his or her own perspective. You can easily recognize first person by its use of the pronouns "I" or "We." First person offers the author a great way to give the reader direct access to a particular character's thoughts, emotions, voice, and way of seeing the world—their *point of view* about the main events of the story. The choice of *which* character gets to have first person point of view can dramatically change a story, as shown in this simple scenario of a thief snatching a lady's purse

- **Thief's POV:** "I was desperate for something to eat. Judging by her expensive-looking shoes, I figured she could afford to part with her purse."
- **Victim's POV:** "He came out of nowhere! Too bad for him, though: I only had five dollars in my bag."

Consider also one of the most famous examples of first person point of view, the very first line of Herman Melville's [Moby-Dick](#):

Call me Ishmael.

Melville uses first person here because he wants to establish a confessional tone for the protagonist. He wants the reader to feel like Ishmael has just sat down next to him on a bar stool, and is about to tell him his life's story. Only first person can have this colloquial and intimate effect. Saying, "His name was Ishmael," for instance, would insert more distance between the reader and the character Ishmael, because the third person narrator would sit *between* the reader and Ishmael. First person, in this way, can have the effect of connecting the reader directly with the story.

First Person Point of View and the Protagonist

In a story told in the first person, the character who acts as narrator will often also be the [protagonist](#) of the story. However, some stories told from the first person do *not* make the narrator the protagonist:

- **First person in which the narrator is the protagonist:** In [The Catcher in the Rye](#), the first person narrator Holden Caulfield is the clear protagonist of the story. His voice dominates the story, and the story he tells is his own.
- **First person in which the narrator is *not* the protagonist:** The novel [The Great Gatsby](#) is narrated by Nick Carraway, but the protagonist of the novel is Jay Gatsby. Nick Carraway tells the story, and the reader is limited to understanding the story through what Nick himself sees, knows, and thinks, but nevertheless the story that Nick tells is not his own but rather Gatsby's.

Second Person Point of View

Second person point of view uses the pronoun "you" to immerse the reader in the experience of *being* the protagonist. It's important to remember that second person point of view is different from simply addressing the reader. Rather, the second person point of view places the reader "on the playing field" by putting them in the position of the protagonist—the one to whom the action occurs. Few stories are appropriate for such a perspective, but occasionally it is quite successful, as in Jay McInerney's [Bright Lights, Big City](#), a novel in which the reader is taken on a wild night through Manhattan.

Eventually you ascend the stairs to the street. You think of Plato's pilgrims climbing out of the cave, from the shadow world of appearances toward things as they really are, and you wonder if it is possible to change in this life. Being with a philosopher makes you think.

Of the three points of view, second person is the most rarely used, primarily because it doesn't allow the narrator as much freedom as first person and third person, so it's hard to sustain this style of narration for very long.

Third Person Point of View

In third person point of view, the narrator is someone (or some entity) who is *not* a character in the story being told. Third person point of view uses the pronouns "he," "she," and "they," to refer to all the characters. It is the most common point of view in writing, as it gives the writer a considerable amount of freedom to focus on different people, events, and places without being limited within the consciousness of a single character. Below is an example of dialogue written in third person by Joseph Heller in his novel [Catch-22](#):

"What are you doing?" Yossarian asked guardedly when he entered the tent, although he saw at once.

"There's a leak here," Orr said. "I'm trying to fix it."

"Please stop it," said Yossarian. "You're making me nervous."

The exchange above is narrated by a narrator who is outside the interaction between Yossarian and Orr; such distance is the hallmark of third person point of view.

Third Person and Degree of Distance

The third person mode is unique from first and second person in another way as well: third person has different variants. These variants depend on how far removed the narrator is from the events of the story, and how much the narrator knows about each character:

- **Third Person Omniscient Point of View:** "Third person omniscient" means that the narrator knows all the thoughts and feelings of every character and can dip in and out of the the internal life of anyone, as needed. Omniscient just means "all-knowing." This type of narrator is more god-like than human, in the sense that their perspective is *unlimited*.
- **Third Person Limited Point of View:** In this type of narration, the narrator does *not* have an omniscient, unlimited perspective. They may have access to the thoughts and feelings of one character, or none at all:
 - A story like [Young Goodman Brown](#), which follows one character closely and reports on that character's thoughts and feelings (but not the thoughts and feelings of others), is an example of third person limited point of view. This type of story gives the reader the feeling that they are inside one person's head *without* using first person pronouns like "I."

Alternating Point of View

Many stories are told from alternating points of view—switching between different characters, or even between different modes of storytelling.

- **Stories can switch between third person points of view:** Many novels switch between different third person points of view. For instance, the chapters of George R.R. Martin's *The Song of Ice and Fire* books are all named after characters, and each chapter is told from the limited third person point of view of the named character.
- **Stories can switch between first person points of view:** William Faulkner's novel [As I Lay Dying](#) is structurally similar to the *Song of Ice and Fire* books in the sense that each chapter is named after a character. However, each chapter is told in the first person by the named character. The Darl chapters are told in the first person by Darl, the Cash chapter are narrated by Cash, the Vardamon chapters by Vardamon, and so on.
- **Stories can even switch between modes of storytelling:** Though less common than other sorts of alternating points of view, some stories can shift not only between different character's points of view, but between actual modes of storytelling. For example, Faulkner's [The Sound and the Fury](#) has four parts. The first three parts are all narrated in the first person, with the first part narrated by Benjy, the second part by Quentin, and the third part by Jason. But the fourth part is told in the third person omniscient and follows a bunch of different characters at different times.



EXAMPLES

Every work of literature has a point of view, and so there are essentially endless examples of point of view in literature. The examples below were chosen because they are good examples of the different modes, and in the case of *The Metamorphosis* the the subtle shift in the nature of the narrator's point of view also shows how an author can play with point of view to suit the themes and ideas of a story.

Third Person Point of View in Kafka's *Metamorphosis*

A great example of third person point of view in literature is the first line from Kafka's [The Metamorphosis](#).

As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect.

For the remainder of the book, Kafka follows the protagonist, Gregor Samsa, in a **limited third person point of view** as he struggles to come to terms with his sudden transformation into an insect. For as long as Gregor remains alive, the third person narrator remains limited by Gregor's own consciousness—the story is told in the third

person, but the narrator never knows or sees any more than Gregor himself does.

However, in the few pages of the story that continue after Gregor dies, the narrator shifts into a **third person omniscient point of view**, almost as if Gregor's death has freed the narrator in a way not so dissimilar to how his death tragically relieves a burden on his family.

Point of View in Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*

Leo Tolstoy's [Anna Karenina](#) is a great example of the **omniscient third person** point of view. In the novel, the narrator sees and knows all, and moves around between the lives of the different characters, dipping into their internal lives and thoughts, and commenting on the narrative as a whole. In Part 5, Chapter 6, the internal lives of two characters are commented on at once, in the moment of their marriage to one another:

Often and much as they had both heard about the belief that whoever is first to step on the rug will be the head in the family, neither Levin nor Kitty could recall it as they made those few steps. Nor did they hear the loud remarks and disputes that, in the observation of some, he had been the first, or, in the opinion of others, they had stepped on it together.

Point of View in Thoreau's *Walden*

Henry David Thoreau's transcendental meditations on isolation were based on his actual lived experience. It makes sense, then, that [Walden](#) (his account of time spent alone in the woods) is written in the **first person point of view**:

When I wrote the following pages, or rather the bulk of them, I lived alone, in the woods, a mile away from any neighbor, in a house which I had built myself, on the shore of Walden Pond, in Concord, Massachusetts, and earned my living by the labor of my hands only. I lived there two years and two months. At present I am a sojourner in civilized life again.



WHY WRITERS USE IT

Point of view is the means by which an author relays either one or a multiplicity of perspectives about the events of their story. It is the

lens crafted by the writer that allows the reader to see a story or argument unfold. Depending on how much information the writer wants to give the reader, this lens will be constructed differently—or in other words, a different mode of point of view will be chosen:

- If the writer wants the reader to have full access to a particular character's internal life, then they might choose either first person or a closely limited third person point of view.
- If the writer wants the reader to know select bits and pieces about every character, they might choose an omniscient third person point of view.
- If the writer wants the reader to know about the rich internal lives of multiple characters, they might choose an alternating first person point of view.
- Lastly, if the writer wants the reader to feel like they themselves are in the center of the action, they might choose a second person point of view.



OTHER RESOURCES

- [The Wikipedia Page on Point of View](#): An overview of narration with a focus on literary point of view.
- [The Dictionary Definition of Point of View](#): A very basic definition of the term point of view.
- [Examples of Second Person](#): A page with some examples of writing in the less common second person point of view.

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Kestler, Justin. "Point of View." LitCharts. LitCharts LLC, 5 May 2017. Web. 2 Oct 2017.

Chicago Manual

Kestler, Justin. "Point of View." LitCharts LLC, May 5, 2017. Retrieved October 2, 2017. <http://www.litcharts.com/literary-devices-and-terms/point-of-view>.