

POINT OF VIEW PRESENTATION NOTES

compiled by Denise Holbrook for presentation to GCWA June, 2015

POV is also called “Narrative Perspective.” The two terms are used interchangeably. POV is whose head we’re in at any point in a story. Whose eyes are we experiencing it through?

Very simply put, dialogue is when character speak, and narration is when the narrator or person telling the story speaks. Quotation marks don’t just enclose dialogue, they separate it from narration.

The narrator guides the reader through the story. Most often, the narrator will be one of your characters. Think of it as the one who escorts the reader through the story.

Ideally, you want your reader to experience the scene so closely that they become that character for the scene, experiencing everything the character does. So it’s important for them to know who they are from the beginning of the scene. This is especially important if you’re writing in a style that has multiple points of view. In that case, you need to establish POV early in *each scene* of the story.

Rule 1. Establish POV EARLY.

There is much debate over just how many POV styles there are. But there are three major types: First, Second and Third. And there are different methods for remembering them:

I (looks like a 1) 1 for First Person

You rhymes with 2. Second Person.

He or She rhymes with 3. Third Person

(Remember that he or she also includes the names of characters.)

Pronoun Clues:

First-Person Pronouns are: I, me, my, mine, we, us, ours.

Second-Person Pronouns are: you and your.

Third-Person Pronouns are: he, she, her, they, them, and character names.

In First-Person POV, the narrator is not just the storyteller; he or she is the leading character in the story, and often uses “I or “we” to tell what’s happening.

First-Person Past Tense has been a more common writing style historically, but present tense is becoming much more popular, especially among younger writers.

For the most part, **Second-Person POV** is used for instruction sheets, cookbooks, guide books. Remember that our Second-Person pronouns were “You” and “Yours.” In a cookbook or a how-to manual, the “you” may not be stated, but it is understood to be you, the reader.

Second-Person POV is used much less often in fiction than other narrative perspectives.

There are three types of Third-Person Narration: Objective, Limited, and Omniscient. The difference between them depends on how many characters’ heads we are allowed to be inside in the story.

In **Third-Person Objective**, the narrator does not reveal the thoughts of ANY characters. Only the characters’ dialogue and actions are told.

In **Third-Person Limited**, we are limited to knowing what ONE character thinks or feels.

Third-Person Omniscient. The literal meaning of the word *Omniscient* is “All Knowing.” This POV allows us to know what MORE THAN ONE OF the characters thinks and feels. It could be *all* of the characters, but it only has to be more than one.

There are differences of opinion among the literati about whether or not we should EVER have more than one point of view in the same scene. Many declare it “head-hopping” and say it should never be allowed. Some, particularly romance writers, assert that, in a romance novel, the relationship is the most important character in the story. So, they argue, the reader likes to know what both the hero and the heroine are thinking in every scene. It’s more work for the writer to show, rather than tell, what characters are thinking, but it’s better writing.

However you define the Omniscient style, when there are just two characters, it seems easy enough for a beginning writer to pull off, and not too confusing for the reader. But when there are many POV characters, it can become overly complicated and ruin the flow of the story. With everyone thinking and feeling and knowing and believing in the same scene, the reader’s attention can get jerked around like a spectator’s head at a fireworks display. It becomes hard to get

anything done quickly. That's why Third-Person Omniscient is not for the beginning writer.

Rule 2. Use only one Narrative Perspective (POV) per scene.

We have to learn to recognize "head hopping" and eliminate it. First read your scene to find out whose head you're in; through whose eyes are you experiencing the story? That's the narrator or POV for the scene.

Next, look for anything that another character in the scene experiences that the narrator couldn't know or wouldn't experience. That's a head hop. If you are using a Limited POV, those things must be eliminated from the scene (remember that you can still "tell" what non-POV characters are thinking or feeling by showing).

If both points of view are vital to your story, you have decided on an omniscient POV. In that case, you must separate their Points of View by scene. A new chapter is one solution, but a section mark works when beginning a new chapter is not called for.

Rule number 3. Fully express one character's thoughts before moving on to the next character.

Another common POV error is including information in a scene that the POV character couldn't possibly know. This includes the names of other characters (even if the reader was introduced to that character in an earlier scene). Tension and suspense is created when the reader knows something the POV character does not, so use this to advantage, especially if you're writing a thriller.

Rule 4. If the POV character for a particular scene doesn't know something, it can't be included in the scene, even if the reader learned it in an earlier scene.

Which POV style is right for your work?

First-Person, whether past or present tense, creates instant identification with the narrator or main character. The reader is with you from start to finish, experiencing everything you do. That intimacy is great.

However, the reader is also limited to knowing only what the main character knows. And your main character and plot better be interesting or it can get claustrophobic!

An additional disadvantage to PRESENT tense is that you can't play with time. You're always in the moment.

The limitation for PAST tense, if you're writing a thriller, is that the reader never wonders if the serial killer is going to off the protagonist, because she's already lived to tell the story. The writer's voice and plot are critical to keeping it alive.

With each of the **Third-Person** POV's, there are advantages and disadvantages as well.

With Third-Person Objective, we don't know anyone's thoughts or feelings. The reader will have to watch and listen for clues to figure out what others are thinking. But since this is how we see the world naturally, it's a comfortable style for readers. It also works well for keeping characters' true motives and loyalties hidden until time for the mystery to be solved. And it's great for the fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pants writer. If your story is heavy on plot and light on characters' personal journeys, you might want to use this style.

The disadvantage is that there is less intimacy between the readers and the protagonist, because they aren't privy to her inner desires and private thoughts. In the Objective style, a writer can't just vomit out what the character feels about every little thing in a thought bubble. It must be conveyed clearly with action and dialogue.

What about Third-Person Limited? As with First-Person, there is the advantage of strong identification with one character. When considering this POV, think carefully about the best person to escort the reader through your story. If it's a crime novel, the PI or police detective is a good choice because he's the main character. He's going to be where the action is. Since he'll likely be the hero of the story, you want your reader to root for him anyway. Making him sympathetic without having him talk about his alcohol problem at every turn will be much easier if you can get into his head at will.

The disadvantage, as with First-Person, is that your reader is limited to what the POV character knows in any given scene. This can actually work well in mystery,

but if you're writing a novel with a large cast of characters, it can be difficult to place your POV character with all of the others in a way that seems natural, unless they all work together or share a common setting throughout the book.

That brings us to Third-Person Omniscient.

While your readers can know the thoughts of a number of characters with this style, it doesn't necessarily create intimacy, and can actually do the opposite. While the method is good for character-driven fiction, it can be difficult to give equal attention to the multiple characters you want your readers to care most about, and their individual stories **MUST** move along at such a pace as to finish simultaneously. That is best done by mapping out your story arcs for each one and making sure your scenes are developed in a way that works chronologically. This is not for writers who create as they go. And with all those characters sharing narrative perspective, there is more opportunity for POV errors.