

PART I: Understanding Point of View

Viewpoint Matters

Among the community of readers, writers, agents, editors, and publishers, you frequently hear about viewpoint. An editor will tell the writer his work has viewpoint errors, or has consistent viewpoint, maybe even creative use of viewpoint.

When your editor criticizes or praises your point of view, she's not talking about your personal views on politics, religion, music, or sports. Probably not, anyway. She's referring instead to the mechanics in how the story is conveyed from the characters' points of view.

A few years back, I participated as a judge in a literary awards competition. After reading a number of entries submitted by writers at widely differing skill and experience levels, I noticed that what hurt new writers the most was point of view. I also noticed that writers with skill and experience, yet few publication credits, were making some of the same mistakes as the new writers, although with less frequency. The thing seems simple yet is rife with pitfalls, some glaring, some subtle.

When the leader of our local writers group asked me if I could give a presentation on any topic that our members would find useful, I knew right away that I wanted to talk about viewpoint mistakes. I've since given that presentation a number of times, and it evolved into this guidebook.

We all read books in which the narrative flows along quite nicely, and suddenly a line or paragraph goes *clunk!* I'm a slow reader to begin with, often because I might reread lines several times. I certainly reread it when it goes *clunk!* Grammatical errors are frequently the culprits, those things which are clumsy or just flat-out wrong. But if the grammar is perfect, what causes the *clunk*?

Too often, point of view mistakes.

I've tried to boil the rules down to the essentials. We'll begin with basic definitions and explanations of the types of viewpoint, followed by creative use of viewpoint in genres, and finally, recognizing, avoiding, and fixing all viewpoint errors, great and small.

By the way, the terms "viewpoint" and "point of view" are interchangeable. In our shorthand world, point of view frequently sneaks about as just "POV." This guidebook will use all three. Other writers sometimes use additional shorthand, like "TPO" for third-person objective, but I'm not crazy about that.

Types of Viewpoint

On this planet, there exist three basic literary points of view. I do not know how the terms were achieved, and they make little sense to me as labels. However, they are the conventions and we must live with them. You recall them from high school. I hope. They are:

- First-person.
- Second-person.
- Third-person.

That's it. I've wracked my brain to invent a fourth-person point of view, and have failed to do so.

Only three to work with? Your creativity hog-tied? The good news is, each of these three points of view possess variations and forms.

Nearly all modern fiction is written in either first-person or third-person. We'll cover those in depth, for good reason, and go into second-person just for the hell of it.

A key thing to remember is that the story may be told as if the viewpoint character is unaware that he or she has a reading or listening audience, watching his or her every move, invading his or her thoughts. It's one of the great talents with which we, as readers, are endowed. We own this ability to suspend disbelief and hop aboard for the ride.

First-Person

First-person viewpoint is told as if from a fully participating narrator. "Narrator" is just that, the character, real or fictional, telling the story. In first-person, the viewpoint character is expressed as "I", "me," or "myself." The forms "my" and "mine" follow.

First-person may be written as though the narrator is intentionally writing or orally communicating her story with the audience. Like she's delivering or writing her last testament in her jail cell.

First-person is not limited to "persons" of the human variety. A story can be narrated by a rat character... and frequently has. Your big toe can be a first-person narrator, but readers may be reluctant to buy a copy of that story.

Right out of the gate, first-person has an obvious advantage of immediacy and intimacy. The author can write the actual thoughts going on in the narrator's mind. If the narrator thinks, *I hate cats*, the author can write it exactly that way.

That advantage, we will see, is not always what the skillful writer wants.

In first-person, the story's main character is usually the narrator, as in **John D. MacDonald's** Travis McGee series. McGee narrates his own exploits, solves his own problems, worries about his own boat. Making him both narrator and main character works well. This is sometimes called **first-person protagonist**, and it's the wise choice for that series.

But not all, as in **first-person ancillary**.

First-Person Ancillary

Consider the Sherlock Holmes stories, by **Arthur Conan Doyle**. Holmes is without question the main character and protagonist of the stories. However, the narrator is Holmes's sidekick, the capable Dr. Watson. Why?

The first-person advantage of immediacy and internal thoughts and emotions would have countered what Doyle sought to portray in Holmes. He envisioned Holmes as a brilliant, enigmatic sort, with a mind most of us can't begin to fathom. It made little sense to place the reader inside Holmes's mind, as it would spoil the illusion of aloof, untouchable brilliance. Rather, we catch glimpses of him at work as dutifully reported by Watson.

This viewpoint mode is called **first-person ancillary**. The narrator is not the main guy. Important as Watson might be, he's ancillary to the great Holmes.

Admittedly, Holmes frequently describes in long passages to Watson whatever adventure he has recently gotten through. Although told as dialogue, these passages function as first-person narratives in themselves. This kind of viewpoint shift to another first-person narrator is called **temporary first-person**. It can come off as a clumsy effort, so pains should be taken to ensure that the shift (for the reader) sails along effortlessly.

Another shining example of first-person ancillary is **F. Scott Fitzgerald's** *The Great Gatsby*. Nick Carraway serves up the narration, although the story clearly revolves around Jay Gatsby and his great, unattainable love, Daisy Buchanan. The choice of Nick as the viewpoint character makes this novel succeed. Fitzgerald wanted us to have Gatsby only revealed in bits and pieces, with Nick's opinions of the principal characters evolving the more he learns:

...he stretched out his arms toward the dark water in a curious way, and, far as I was from him, I could have sworn he was trembling. Involuntarily I glanced seaward—and distinguished nothing except a single green light, minute and faraway, that might have been the end of a dock. When I looked once more for Gatsby he had vanished, and I was alone again in the unquiet darkness.

First-Person Multiple

First-person multiple sounds like a mistake. If first-person is told by *the* narrator, how can there be more than one? What gives?

Simple. There are just more than one narrator. Each of them gets a turn at the wheel.

A structural problem with first-person multiple becomes readily apparent. In third-person, you can—with care and skill—switch viewpoint characters within a single scene. If you attempted this with first-person multiple, you would most likely leave the reader confused and disoriented. If first-person multiple is to be used, it should be done with a complete change of scene, and preferably not within the same chapter.

Bram Stoker pulled it off with a clever approach in *Dracula*. The novel is told in the form of letters, journal entries, ship's logs, telegrams, newspaper clippings, and doctor's notes, by multiple characters, almost all written in the first-person.

Dracula begins with the journal of Jonathan Harker, the young English businessman summoned to remote Transylvania to assist the mysterious Count with his planned expatriation to London. From there, we shift to the logbook of a doomed ship's captain, the letters of Mina Harker, Jon's fiancé, Mina's friend Lucy Westenra, (who's way hotter than Mina, but that's beside the point), and of course the medical journals of Van Helsing.

A novel such as *Dracula*, written as a series of documents, is called an **epistolary** novel (from the Greek, *a pistol, Larry?*). Epistolary stories don't have to be first-person, by the way. They can be told through third-person accounts in newspaper or magazine clippings, as in **Stephen King's** *Carrie*.

Gillian Flynn weaves a more restricted first-person multiple narrative in *Gone Girl*. The central structure and strength of the story is the "he-said/she-said" back and forth between husband and wife narratives.

Viewpoint within Nested Stories

Variations on first-person multiple can be built around stories that are "**nested**" within another story. Some are structured such that there might be a first-person narrator telling the story of another first-person narrator. As an example, in *The Time Machine*, by **H.G. Wells**, the story opens as narrated by a guest summoned to the home of a friend. The friend (identified by the narrator only as "the Time Traveler") tells the first-person account of his adventure into the distant future. As he concludes his tale, we shift back into the first-person viewpoint of the original narrator.

The Camera in First-Person

In photography and film, because there is an actual camera involved, there is a defined and limiting point of view. The camera *cannot* enter the mind, despite what a director or photographer might claim. However, in so-called point of view filming, shot as though a character is filming something—a film within a film—the intended effect is that of first-person. Or as when the camera shows what the director wants you to believe is exactly what this or that character is seeing. This little trick comes off as somewhat clumsy and unconvincing, and has become a cliché in horror movies, often accompanied by heavy breathing. After a gory scene, the camera usually shifts out of this and back into normal objective mode.

Multiple first-person in motion pictures seems to have been achieved to a degree in the cinematic equivalent of first-person prose, in the recent trend of "found footage" movies. Stuff like *The Blair Witch Project*, *Cloverfield*, and *Europa Report*. Don't get me started.

First-Person Plural

First-person plural is the cousin of first-person multiple. The cousin you lock in the attic and never let out. The story is told by a narrator... but the narrator is not an “I,” “me,” or “myself.” It’s the plural “we,” “us,” or “ourselves.” It’s first-person, but as if told by more than one person. “We” becomes the narrator.

Caution! Don’t try this at home, kids. If it sounds unusual, well, it is. It can be quite unwieldy, heaving about as if a group is telling the story. It can take the tone and feel more of a political speech than a story.

However, in the hands of a talented writer, it can come alive and just seem like the right choice. A terrific example is “A Rose for Emily”, a short story by **William Faulkner**. In this haunting story, the little town itself becomes the narrator, a sort of collective consciousness as well as a collective conscience. The reader even feels a bit of vicarious guilt, as we all have known and watched and ignored someone like Emily in our lives. And it works:

We did not say she was crazy then. We believed she had to do that. We remembered all the young men her father had driven away, and we knew that with nothing left, she would have to cling to that which had robbed her, as people will.