

WRITING TIP SHEET: POINT OF VIEW

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Point of view guides the reader's experience of the story, so the choice of POV is vital to how the piece works.

1st Person: The use of "I". Everything is from inside the character's skin. The character is telling the story, and we are living it through the character's eyes. The author can only reveal and the reader can only have access to the same amount of information in the same way that the character does. You've heard of "method acting"? Think of first person as a type of "method writing." Sensory detail comes the most easily in first person. Unfortunately, so do tangents. The character thinks of something or remembers something, and before we know it, it's fifteen pages later on something that has nothing to do with the story. It's fine to follow all of those tangents in an early draft; but don't hesitate to cut when needed.

Examples: *CATCHER IN THE RYE* by JD Salinger, *THE COLOR PURPLE* by Alice Walker, *ONE FLEW OVER THE CUCKOO'S NEST* by Ken Kesey, *THE HAWLEY BOOK OF THE DEAD* by Chrysler Szarlan. Kate Carlisle writes her Fixer Upper Mysteries in first, and Vicki Delaney's new series, starting with *REST YE MURDERED GENTLEMEN* is in first. Our own Arlene Kay wrote her Boston Uncommons books in first person.

2nd Person: "You". The author talks to the reader, sometimes as the character, sometimes as an invisible narrator. Extremely difficult to pull off. Sometimes mixed with one of the other POVs when the character or narrator breaks from the story to make an aside to the reader.

Examples: The novel *COMPLICITY* by Iain Banks, alternates first person narrative with second person narrative chapters – he's one of the few novelists who pulled this off. *BRIGHT LIGHTS BIG CITY* by Jay McInerney, also gets away with it.

Close 3rd Person (also known as "3rd Person Limited"): The use of "he" or "she" in the narration, but still through the eyes of a particular character. This allows a slightly wider perspective, while also giving the reader an intimacy with the writer. If one wants to write different chapters from multiple points of view, this is one of the easiest ways to do so. You can tell more of the story and let the reader in on more than a single character knows by using more than one viewpoint. Each individual viewpoint is specific in the information available to that character, but together, the reader gets a broader picture. Jayne Ann Krentz does this, in her contemporary series, and in the historicals she writes as Amanda Quick, and in the futuristic romances she writes as Jayne Castle. Charles Finch's Charles Lenox mysteries are in close third (for the most part). In my romantic suspense novel *ASSUMPTION OF RIGHT*, I alternated between the two protagonists; I did the same in the paranormal mystery *TRACKING MEDUSA*. The challenge with third person is that sometimes you step so far away that you lose the POV and it starts to feel omniscient for a sentence or two, or you jump into someone's else's head for a few paragraphs or comment ON the character in whose

POV you're supposedly in rather than commenting FROM that character. Finch does this sometimes at the end of a chapter, where he steps out of the frame as the character and tells the reader a piece of foreshadowing, and, in the last few paragraphs of the book, where he often slips into either Edmund's (the protag's brother) or Jane's (the protag's wife) POV. It has the effect of a camera pulling back into a long shot. I don't think it particularly works, but I haven't heard complaints from other readers.

3rd Person Omniscient: The author plays God. It's fallen out of favor in most cases, because unless it is very skillfully done, it removes the reader from the situation – one feels like one is watching from behind glass. In this day and age, if we want to WATCH, we can put in a DVD. One of the few authors who skillfully moves in and out of different characters' minds in the same scenes (and does so by going into a character's POV, sliding into neutral for a few paragraphs, and THEN going into another character) is Louise Penny in her Inspector Gamache books. An author who head hops (but her readers don't mind much) is Nora Roberts. She moves from close third to head-hopping third. Novels written when novels were a new form were often written in omniscient, with the author playing God. Since many novels moralized at the reader, it made sense in the development of the form. The novel has evolved away from that style. Readers want a more intimate experience with the character.

POV is deeply related to sensory detail. Who experiences a particular scene decides which details are important and the frame of reference.

In prose, because it is so intimate, that sense of habitation is even more important. Reading is an intimate, sensual experience, even if you're using a Kindle. You are inside someone else's mind, guiding them through the story from the INSIDE of that individual's soul. The reader hears YOUR authorial voice guiding her, which runs under the voices of your characters.

Can POVs be effectively mixed?

It gets confusing within a scene. Generally, change POVs at the end of a scene (and use a scene break) or with a new chapter. In *A DISCOVERY OF WITCHES*, Deborah Harkness has Diana's chapters in first person, and Matthew's in third. The initial shift is disconcerting, but it gets easier as one goes on. Some books use multiple first person perspectives in different chapters or scenes; most use close third.

When you do shift a POV, your first sentence in the new POV is crucial. We have to know immediately in whose POV we are and, if we've been there before, recognize it. If you're going to shift POVs in your piece, differentiating cadence in your characters is even more important, and the first sentence in every POV shift will need special attention so the tone fits that character.

In the revision process, if I'm using different POVs, I will sort the chapters by character, and then do a revision pass where I do all the chapters from Character A's POV, then all

the chapters from character B's POV, etc., so that I have the tone and through-line of each POV character I use in the book.

When I've put them back in the order I want for the book, I do another pass to smooth it all out and make sure I don't have needless repetition or logistical errors.

How Do You Choose a Point of View?

Ultimately, it's about what serves the story best. Who are your characters, what drives your plot, what are your themes? First person needs a strong, charismatic, unusual character. We need to WANT to live inside this person's skin for however many hours it takes us to read the book, and whatever time span the book covers. If the character isn't interesting enough to inhabit, first person will fail. Close third gives one more flexibility, but if you use multiple perspectives in close third, the characters need to be different enough from each other so the reader knows in whose perspective he is at any given moment. The internal voices and any internal monologues need to have strength and difference.

What Happens if You Choose the Wrong POV in an Early Draft?

That's the beauty of revision. In revisions, you're not just running a piece through spell check; you are "re-envisioning" the story to make it as strong as possible. You can rewrite a book from first person to third person or the other way around. However, it is far more than simply changing the pronouns. It changes the whole voice of the book because the story flows through a different frame of reference.