

POINT OF VIEW

Point of view is the author's relationship to his or her fictional world, especially to the minds of the characters. Put another way, point of view is the position from which the story is told. There are four common points of view, four positions the author can adopt in telling the story.

Omniscient Point of View

In the omniscient position, the author, not one of the characters, tells the story, and the author assumes complete knowledge of the characters' actions and thoughts. The author can thus move at will from one place to another, one time to another, one character to another, and can even speak his or her own views directly to the reader as the work goes along. The author will tell us anything he or she chooses about the created world of the work. Many of the great eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novels utilize an omniscient point of view; examples are Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, and Fielding's *Joseph Andrews*.

Limited Omniscient Point of View

When the limited omniscient position is used, the author still narrates the story but restricts (limits) his or her revelation—and therefore our knowledge—of the thoughts of all but one character. This character may be either a main or peripheral character. One name for this character is “central consciousness.” A device of plot and characterization that often accompanies this point of view is the character's gradual discovery of himself or herself until the story climaxes in an epiphany (see pages 50-51). Examples of the limited omniscient point of view are Hawthorne's “Young Goodman Brown,” Crane's “The Open Boat,” and, for the most part, Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. Sometimes the author restricts the point of view so severely that we see everything solely through the mind of a single character, like sunlight filtered through the leaves and branches of a tall tree. The later fiction of Henry James experiments with this severe restriction of the limited omniscient point of view. His story “The Beast in the Jungle” and his novel *The Ambassadors* are examples. Other writers, such as James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and William Faulkner, carry James's experiments further with a “stream of consciousness” technique, which puts the reader literally in the mind of a character. In the first section of Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* we experience the chaotic thoughts of a mentally retarded man, and we view the novel's world solely through his mind. A short story that uses a stream-of-consciousness technique is Katherine Anne Porter's “The Jilting of Granny Weatherall.”

First-Person Point of View

In the first-person position, the author is even more restricted: one of the characters tells the story, eliminating the author as narrator. Whereas in the limited omniscient point of view the author can reveal anything about one character, even things the character may be dimly aware of, here the narration is restricted to what one character *says* he or she observes. The character-narrator may be a major character who is at the center of events or a minor character who does not participate but simply observes the action. Examples of first-person narrative are Dickens's

Great Expectations, Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado," and Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener." And unusual use of the first-person point of view is the epistolary narrative, which reveals action through letters. (An *epistle* is a letter and *epistolary* means written in letters.) Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*, Henry James's "A Bundle of Letters," and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* are all epistolary narratives.

Objective (dramatic) Point of View

In the objective position, the author is more restricted than in any other. Though the author is the narrator, he or she refuses to enter the minds of any of the characters. The writer sees them (and lets us see them) as we would in real life. This point of view is sometimes called "dramatic" because we see the characters as we would the characters in a play. We learn about them from what they say and do, how they look, and what other characters say about them. But we don't learn what they think unless they tell us. This point of view is the least common of all. Examples are Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants" and "The Killers," Stephen Crane's "The Blue Hotel," and Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery."

Tone

Tone is also an aspect of point of view since it has a great deal to do with the narrator. Tone is the narrator's predominant attitude toward the subject, whether that subject be a particular setting, an event, a character, or an idea. The narrator conveys his or her attitude through the way narrative devices are handled, including choice of words. Sometimes the narrator will state point-blank how he or she feels about a subject; more often, the narrator's attitude is conveyed indirectly. Jack Burden, the narrator of Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men*, maintains a flippant and cynical tone through most of the narration. Jake Barnes, the narrator of Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, maintains a stoical, hardboiled tone. Dr. Watson, the narrator of the Sherlock Holmes stories, manifests a bemused, surprised tone.

Questions About Point of View

Point of view is important to an understanding of a story in two main ways. First, the author may choose a particular point of view in order to emphasize one character's perception of things. Point of view also influences *our* perception of things. The omniscient narrator can tell us what a character thinks, but the limited omniscient and first-person points of view make us *experience* what the character thinks. To make the emphasis even more emphatic, an author may include several points of view in the same work. Dickens in *Bleak House* shuttles back and forth between a first-person narrative and an omniscient narrative. We see that the first-person narrator has a more limited view of things of developing character and of making a point about the limits of human perception.

Second, point of view is important when you suspect the trustworthiness of the narrator. A preliminary question is, Who tells the story? But a searching follow-up question is, Can you trust the narrator to tell you the truth about the events, characters, and setting of the story? You

can almost always trust omniscient narrators. But you should be suspicious about first-person narrators and the “centers-of-consciousness” characters in limited omniscient stories. Sometimes these characters distort what they observe. Ask, then, if circumstances such as their age, education, social status, prejudices, or emotional states should make you question the accuracy or validity of what they say and think. Ask, also, if the author differentiates between his or her view of things and the characters’ views.

Mark Twain makes such a distinction in *Huckleberry Finn*. When Huck sees the Grangerford house, he says, “It was a mighty nice family, and a mighty nice house, too. I hadn’t seen no house out in the country before that was so nice and had so much style.” He proceeds to describe the interior with awe and reverence. But although Huck is impressed with the furnishings, Twain clearly is not. We recognize Twain’s attitude from the details Huck provides: the unread books, the reproductions of sentimental paintings, the damaged imitation fruit, the crockery animals, the broken clock, the painted hearth, the tablecloth “made out of beautiful oilcloth,” the piano “that had tin pans in it.” Huck also shows his admiration for Emmeline Grangerford’s poetry by reproducing some of it to share with us. But we see, as Twain wants us to see, that the poetry is awful.

Finally, Huck is awestruck by the family’s aristocratic bearing: “Col. Grangerford was a gentleman, you see. He was a gentleman all over; and so was his family. He was well born....He didn’t have to tell anybody to mind their manners—everybody was always good mannered where he was.” Yet he fails to see, as Twain and we see, the ironic contrast between the family’s good manners and its conduct of an illogical, murderous feud with another family. Twain’s handling of point of view in this novel helps to develop both character and theme. By presenting Huck’s credulous view of things, it develops Huck as an essentially innocent person. By ironically contrasting Twain’s view to Huck’s, it underscores the author’s harsher and more pessimistic perception of “reality.”

Once you have determined a work’s point of view, good essay topics should emerge from two general questions: Why has the author chosen this point of view? What effects does it have on other elements of the story—theme, characterization, setting, language? Some follow-up questions are these: What effect does the author’s point of view have on us and the way we view the world of the work? For example, if the point of view is first person, we have a much more limited view than if it is omniscient. The omniscient point of view makes us feel as though we understand everything about the world of the work, as though everything revealed by the omniscient narrator is true. What perspective of the world, then, does the author want us to have? Also, what do we learn about the nature of human perception from the author’s handling of first person and especially limited omniscience? Henry James’s limited omniscience often shows people as blind to the needs and desires of other people and of themselves as well. If the point of view is first person, is the narrator telling the story to someone? If so, to whom? How do they react? What do we learn about the narrator from that fact? Try this question on Poe’s “The Cask of Amontillado,” for example, and so what you come up with. If the point of view is objective (dramatic), does it seem as though the narrator is emotionally uninvolved and rationally objective about the characters and events? What do we gain by not being about to enter the characters’ minds?

Thinking on Paper About Point of View

1. Identify the point of view of the story. Describe how the story would change if it were told from each of the other points of view.
2. List the main characters in the story. Write a paragraph on one or more characters, explaining how the story would be different if there character were narrating it.
3. Mark places where the narrator or central consciousness differs from our view of reality or fails to see important truths that we or other characters see.
4. Mark places that are particularly expressive of the narrator's tone. List the characteristics of tone.