

Three Basic Points-of-View

In literature, there are three basic perspectives or points-of-view:

1. **First person**

Using first-person pronouns (I, me, we, us), this narrator is a character involved in the plot of the story and engaged with the other characters. Obviously, this perspective is **limited** because the reader can know only what this character knows and experiences. Often, this kind of narrator is **unreliable** because his or her own biases, beliefs, and limitations keep us from knowing the truth of the story.

2. **Third person limited**

Like a first-person narrator, this narrator focuses primarily on one character so that our knowledge is limited to one character's experiences. However, this narrator is not a character in the story, so only third-person pronouns are used. Another difference is that this type of narrator is generally reliable, giving the reader an accurate, although incomplete, version of events. Furthermore, this type of narration will often shift, either providing an occasional piece of information that the focus character couldn't know or transferring the perspective for a portion of the story from one character to another.

3. **Third person omniscient**

The word "omniscience" is made up of the prefix "omni-" (meaning "all") and the root word "science" (meaning "knowledge"). Therefore, an omniscient narrator is all-knowing, not limited by restrictions of place and time like a normal character would be. Additionally, omniscient narrators are often able to fill the reader in on more than one character's thoughts. To be considered an omniscient point-of-view, however, the narrator should more than just occasionally reveal a degree of omniscience. Instead, there should be a rather consistent presentation of facts and events that reveals the unrestricted nature of the narrator. Such evidence would include a narrator revealing knowledge of multiple simultaneous events occurring in different places; multiple characters' backgrounds, thoughts, or motivations; or multiple periods of time, either spanning multiple lifetimes or revealing a seemingly supernatural knowledge of the future.

Think "Predominant" Instead of "Absolute"

When identifying a work's perspective, it is important to think about the story **as a whole** and about the **predominate** point-of-view. Also, it's important to realize that sometimes the perspective cannot be succinctly labeled but instead must be explained. For instance, William Faulkner's novel *As I Lay Dying* employs first-person narration throughout, but each chapter is narrated by a different character. It would be insufficient and misleading to simply state that novel is written in a first-person perspective. As another example, consider Richard Connell's "The Most Dangerous Game," which has a point-of-view primarily limited to the character Rainsford until the last page or so, when it switches to focus on the character General Zaroff for a time. To simply state that the story has a limited narrator is incomplete and doesn't give us an accurate idea of how the point-of-view works. Even worse, labeling the narrator as omniscient is simply inaccurate even though evidence from the story could technically support the definition of an omniscient point-of-view.

When determining a work's point-of-view, thinking about the perspective's impact on the story can be helpful. For instance, surprise endings are almost always the result of a limited point-of-view;

otherwise, the reader would not be surprised by the revealed knowledge of events that the narrator has withheld. By focusing on one character, the narrator allows the reader join in a character's astonishment at a sudden and shocking revelation.

Determining Point of View: Questions to Consider

To help you determine the perspective of a story, ask the following questions:

- Is the narrator a character in the story?
- What does the narrator seem to know about the characters?
- Does the narrator focus on one character?
- Is there anything the narrator seems not to know or seems not to be telling you?
- Is there anything the narrator knows that only an omniscient narrator could know? (mult. simultaneous events, mult. characters' thoughts, mult. characters' past, the future)
- Does the perspective shift at any point in the story?
- What is the predominate point-of-view over the course of the whole story?