

Point of View

And why it's important

by Ian Bone

"Simplicity is not started with, it's arrived at."

(I read this quote in a theatre program once. Not sure who it is attributed to.)

Point of View

Who's Telling This Story, Anyway?

An obvious element of fiction is that someone is narrating the story to the reader. Who is this narrator? The writer? The writer is the one who is creating this problematical monster that sits between him or herself and the reader: the text. It is their only link. The writer may insert his or her own voice now and then, or even talk directly to the reader, but in the vast majority of fictional prose, the writer inserts a narrator who tells the story on the page to the reader.

This may seem an obvious point but it uncovers a crucial reason why Point of View is so important. By creating a narrator the writer has already started to shape the reader's response to the text. This is because the narrator has a position – be it physical, emotional, intellectual or moral – to the narrative that is playing out in the text.

Point of View has been described as a 'lens' to the story, or a 'portal' through which the reader appreciates the narrative. It controls the reader by limiting what they can know at any given stage in the story, by taking them close or distancing them from the story, by showing them aspects of the story from a vantage point that may, or may not, skew their understanding, by *manipulating* them at every turn.

The Basic Stuff

The basic blocks of Point of View are generally listed as:

- First person
- Second person
- Third person

Limited

Omniscient

First person is where a character within the story tells the story. They may be a central character or a peripheral character, but they are part of the story in some way. Second person is direct communication from the writer to the reader. Most commonly used in late 19th C literature for children. Third person is the most prevalent form of narrator, and the two distinctions are limited and omniscient. Limited tells the story through the experiences, thoughts and feelings of one (usually) character and is the most widely applied form of third person. Omniscient tells the story knowing all characters' thoughts and feelings as well as all that is happening. Some make the distinction between this omniscience and a neutral, objective or 'dramatic' omniscience which tells only what is happening or what is said without insight into thoughts and feelings.

You may have heard it said that point of view and first person/third person narrative voice are different. By that it is meant: don't assume that by selecting either a first, third limited or third omniscient narrator you've got point of view sorted. Apart from the variations achieved by how 'close' or 'distant' you take the reader into the characters and/or the action, you can also manipulate what the reader sees, hears and knows by either withholding or skewing what is presented. These subtleties (and more), or point of view techniques, emerge from the sets of rules or conventions contained within each basic point of view narrator you choose for your fiction. And it's the subtleties refined that begin to chart your emotional map.

Point of View as an Emotional Map

As I've already stated, Point of View shapes the reader's response to the text. It creates an emotional map that the reader uses (without thinking about it) to make their way through the unfamiliar terrain of the text. How? The reader is continually constructing meaning as they read. They are asking questions. 'Who is this character? Why are they doing this? What's going on?' And as they construct answers to these questions they build a store of information which will determine how they interpret what comes next.

The writer through the narrator's point of view, controls what information the reader gets at every stage of the story. How the writer builds empathy towards one or more characters, creates prejudice towards a situation, sets off intellectual questions in the reader's mind, lays clues about plot or character, evolves wider issues and themes

or asks deep questions about ethics or morality is shaped by the point of view employed.

To illustrate this, look at the following example: A young woman falls in love with a beautiful but distant young man. She adores his physicality, but also the quiet, gentle and unattainable soul she sees in him. He also falls in love with her and loves her outgoing personality, her love of life, but he feels awkward, even afraid, around her. To the young woman the young man becomes many things: an object of desire, a friend, a lover, a cause of pain and frustration. Through her relationship with him she questions her own need for a lover, for a partner, for a remedy to the empty feeling she has. She muses on the nature of love. She wonders if it is something true or something she has been manipulated into feeling. She reflects on past regrets with the young man and questions his truthfulness as well as her own. For the young man the young woman becomes many things: a friend, a lover, his conscience, his social organiser. He begins to lose himself in the relationship until it feels as if he is being smothered. He questions whether he can stay with her (he still loves her) and stay himself. He can't stop thinking about the future and the wider world out there that he wants to tackle. Every time he thinks about what he wants to do with his life, he becomes more excited than when he's with her.

As you can see, the above example contains a variety of elements ranging from the emotional through to the intellectual. It also raises a possible wider dissertation about the nature of love and gender. But the crucial question is, in telling such a story, what map will you give the reader to negotiate the narrative so that they can see all of the terrain that has just been outlined? What are the strengths and weaknesses of a third person narrative as opposed to a first person? What about third person limited opposed to third person omniscient?

I believe that to answer these questions, you must start with some more basic and vital questions that every writer has to face at some stage in creating a text:

- Whose story is this?
- What do I want to say about the character/s?
- What do I want the reader to feel?
- What do I want the reader to think?

Let's say we choose to answer the first question by saying this is both the young man's and the young woman's story. By giving them equal space we can not only explore a love affair from both sides, but we can also throw in a bit of discussion about gender and how the two sexes approach matters of love. The second question is fairly much answered by the list of elements in the example. The third question is the tricky one. Who do you feel more sympathy for? Who do you feel more empathy with? Do you want the reader to think he's a bastard and she's been wronged? Do you want them to think she's smothered him? Do you want to lay out both experiences and let the reader come to their own conclusions?

Let's assume we go for the later. We'll tell the story giving equal time to both characters and allow the readers to come to their own conclusions. This will satisfy the final question which asks what we want the reader to think. It seems a fair enough tactic, given what we've listed above. After all, we can hardly discuss gender and love by being biased, can we? (Spot the trick question!)

Having decided to lay out both experiences and allow the reader to conclude for themselves, we come up against a very tricky conundrum. How do we manipulate the reader's emotions if we're telling the story from both sides? How do we get into those characters so that the reader really cares about them?

Let's say we opt for a third person omniscient approach, giving equal time to both characters. Timing, pacing and structure now become crucial. If we tell of the first time he felt a spark for her, how he felt, how he wondered, then we tell of the first time she felt a spark for him. how she felt, how she wondered, then their first time they recognised the attraction, how he felt, what he wanted, what he said, then how she felt, what she wanted, what she expected... Is your head spinning yet? Because mine is typing this. The reader wants to settle into a story when they start reading. They want to feel confident that this writer will be able to take them on a ride, not a roller coaster. If you give them a map that points them left then right then left then right, they might very well want to throw it away.

So how do we achieve the omniscient voice without making the reader feel sea-sick? Remember, you as the writer have the power (it's a wonderful feeling). You shape the ride. Perhaps the key is in distance. Do you stand back a little and allow the story to take place without adding too much insight from the narrator? In other words, ration the character thoughts and feelings so that when they do come through they have more impact and are appropriate to exactly what you're aiming for the reader to

see, feel and hear at that moment. Or, perhaps you could opt for the neutral omniscient narrator (called objective narrator above) and simply tell the story but let the images, actions, dialogue and their juxtaposition portray the emotional content. (Remember the first exercise we did as a class?) Although there's a fair argument to be had that this narrator is anything but neutral or objective, unless of course it is purely descriptive of action and dialogue.

Remember that each point of view narration comes with a set of rules or expectations that the reader will carry into your text. Like it or not, they are there. For example, the omniscient narrator is almost exclusively a *reliable* narrator. I say almost because it has been used to 'fool' the reader but only in the hands of very, very good writers. What this narrator tells the reader is true and fair and accurate. It isn't skewed by perspective. Say you want to pick up on the young man's feelings of being smothered. It would not suit this narrator's voice to state, 'She smothered him every day,' unless that is exactly what is happening. It is fact. And you demonstrate this through the action. If you want to convey that the young man *feels* smothered, then you put it in those words and you demonstrate it in those terms. There is a difference.

When you set up your narrator and point of view, you lock into the reader's assumptions about how the story is going to be told. As I've already said, those assumptions can be manipulated to your own end, but for the most part you really shouldn't be playing with them too much. The reader has got enough on his or her plate trying to understand your characters and story and plot without having to do mental gymnastics over the point of view. (So have you as a writer!)

Another approach to our love story is to go for the limited third person and stick to one character. Work within that discipline and see if you can reveal both sides. Or you could tell an entire chapter from one character, then the next chapter from the other. Or, take the reader into the story with one character using the limited third person voice until you have drawn them in, brought them to a point where it is the right time to unsettle them a little, then pick up the story from the other character's limited third person voice within a chapter or section. If you do this, how will you signal the changes? Will you put gaps into the story? Will you use a device, such as a piece of action that one takes over with, then the other? Be aware that it will help the reader to make the change if you give them a signal. They are constantly looking for clues, and will make assumptions if you don't give them a nudge and say, 'Hey, I've changed voices here...!'

Remember, the limited third person comes with a few sets of rules as well. If you are writing in that point of view, you cannot suddenly delve into the mind or thoughts of another character. It confuses the reader who will have to challenge their assumptions and therefore step out of your story. Unless you really want them to do that (not a trick you should try without a bit of practise) then keep to the convention. If you want to reveal that the other character is feeling hurt, then you can say 'a pained, hurt, wounded expression came across his face.' Etc etc. Observation from the main character, or from what the main character would see.

One of the delicious rules of this point of view is that you can make this narrator totally *unreliable*. They can skew perspective, manipulate emotion, hide facts or play for sympathy. Of course, if you do that you might need to rethink your tactic of telling both sides of the story. Unless you play this same game with both characters in two separate chapters.

There is a whole playground of point of view tools you can use to manipulate the reader. When you write your story, either before first draft or after or at any draft, make sure you are consistent with the answers to the four questions above. Whose story? What will be said about the characters? What will the reader feel? Think? When you have finished your draft, read your work and see if you have stuck to this resolve. If it is changed, if you find you've gone for more weight to one character than the other, then maybe that's where your heart lies? Maybe that's what you have to do with your re-write. Tell it from that character.

Final Word

The art of fictional prose is both simple and complex. The simplicity is in the beautiful relationship you can establish between yourself and an anonymous reader. After all, it's just words on a page, yet you can make them *feel*. The complexity is in the tools you need to use to create this simplicity: in the dance between character, plot, description, voice, point of view and all the other subsets contained within those headings!

Don't expect to be able to control all of those elements at once. It takes time to get them where you want them. I've been writing fiction for nearly ten years now and only just feel in control of most of them (some of the time!). I also truly believe that I am still learning and will continue to learn.

Good luck.