

Point of View in Writing for Children

By

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When I think of the term, *point of view* (POV), I imagine a flashlight's wedge shaped beam. Everything illuminated by the beam is within the point of view, all else is in the dark—unknown.

But who is holding that flashlight? It could be an all seeing, impersonal reporter who holds the beam from a distance and can thus know all about every character in the story. It could be an understanding observer who holds the light over the main character's shoulder and sees the world the way *he/she* or *they* do. The author might move in close and “become” any character: a pirate, a pony, a pencil, or even alternating characters, and let *I* hold the beam. He/she might even hand over the light and let *you* do the seeing.

As writers, we get to choose who is seeing and thus telling our story. The point of view we decide to use is critical to our best possible work. Sometimes the choice is easy, especially when one or more characters start talking urgently to us, fighting to get their narrative into print. Other times it takes careful consideration and perhaps even trial and error to discover which POV will be most effective.

In writing both fiction and non-fiction, with the exception of journals and letters, we generally take on the voice of a narrator to tell our story because using our own voice can be disruptive. The magic spell—that *willing suspension of disbelief*—is broken. What if the author of a biography of JFK who never knew the man personally, wrote the book from the first person POV: “I always admired JFK, so I went to the library and found out

that as a child he loved to . . .” The *author*’s POV just doesn’t belong in a biography unless it’s an *autobiography*.

But the first rule of writing is that there are no rules. Occasionally interjecting one’s own voice can be effective and even create a stronger belief in the story. In of her amazing website, Cheryl Klein (Senior Editor at Arthur A. Levine Books, an imprint of Scholastic) gives this example from *The Secret Garden* by Frances Hodgson Burnett. “When Mary Lennox was sent to Misselthwaite Manor to live with her uncle everybody said she was the most disagreeable-looking child ever seen. It was true, too. She had a little thin face and a little thin body, thin light hair and a sour expression.” Says Klein, “I want to point out the “It was true, too”—the narrative voice insinuating itself in there to say “Yup, she really is that awful. I am somebody you can trust because I’m giving you the straight and terrible truth about this girl.” Here the intruding voice of the writer works.

More usually, in both fiction and nonfiction, an author uses a narrative voice and that voice has a POV. As Klein also points out, we writers really are not—as we so often believe—seeking *our own* voice. We already have that! She cites the acting ability of Meryl Streep, who dons such an amazing array of completely believable personas that we have little idea of who the real woman is. What we writers should be seeking is that chameleon, shape-shifting actor’s ability of assuming the voice of *our character or narrator*. When we do it convincingly, whether the narrator is good or evil, reliable or unreliable, we create someone the reader finds both fascinating and worth spending time with.

So what are the possible points of view available for us to use? Your English teacher probably drilled this into you, or maybe as an English teacher yourself, you are the one doing the drilling! Still, many developing writers, myself included, get confused from time to time. It's worth going over the list to clear up the tangles and to see what some of the pros and cons of each POV are.

To help us, I rounded up examples from my bookshelves. I've had the experience of changing a third person narrative to first person for one editor and then back again to third for another editor. Patty Gauch of Philomel books once asked me to write a chapter of *The Kingfisher's Gift* into first person and then back into third in order to help me really see through the eyes of eleven year old Franny Morrow. I found the exercise to be incredibly helpful. There are lots of resources in your library and on the internet. I especially liked Wikipedia's clear, concise article.

So here are some Possible Points of View

First Person is used in all genres, but is especially effective for YA because it offers teens so much possibility for internal thoughts. The author *becomes* one of his/her characters, telling his/her own story, or that of another character, or even switching from first to third person telling a story within a story. Rarely, the first person plural "we" rather than "I" is used. In autobiographical fiction, the author is a character in the story and still assumes a narrative voice.

Pro: The story comes straight “from the horse’s mouth” (especially if you are reading *Black Beauty*!) The reader gets a close up view of the action and the voice of the narrator can reveal much about his/her character. This POV can be really effective for humor.

Con: Everything in the story must be either witnessed or heard about by the narrator and the author gets no chance for reflection. His/her opinion can only be revealed through irony and the reader’s interpretation.

First Person Stream of Consciousness is an extension of first person POV rarely used for children. By letting words flow, seemingly randomly, the author recreates the thoughts, subconscious or even irrational, that go on inside his/her character’s head.

Pro: Can be very engaging, hard hitting, and lyrical.

Con: Can be challenging for the reader.

Second Person is used in some novels, picture books, and nonfiction, but is not a commonly used form, especially for children. It is frequently paired with present tense.

“When once you have lived on an island . . .”

Pro: It can be very engaging.

Con: It’s difficult to maintain throughout a story.

Third Person Omniscient is used in textbooks, nonfiction articles, and novels. “The war ended . . .” “Manatees like warm water . . .” “He/she/they/ wanted . . .”

Pro: The author can interpret behavior of characters, comment, and show the whole picture.

Con: Can distance reader from story.

Third Person Omniscient Passive: “It has been said . . .” Used in texts and encyclopedias.

Pro: Avoids precision.

Con: Adds detachment.

TPO Universal: Narrator knows things his/her character does not, “little did he know that back at the ranch Mabel had burned the chili. . .”

Pro: Can be fun or reinforce author’s believability.

Con: Old fashioned, distances reader.

TPO Objective is the “Fly on the wall” technique often used for newspapers and tells the story with out revealing the characters’ thoughts.

Pro: Has speed and action, forces reader to make his own interpretations.

Con: Relies on external action and dialog, offers no interpretation by author.

***Third Person Limited POV** is used the most frequently in children’s literature of all genres. I’ve starred this as it is a way of really helping your reader care about the protagonist while still being able to show things the protagonist might not see or know about.

Pro: “Looking over the shoulder” of the main character(s) creates immediacy and sympathy. The reader sees, hears, feels, smells, and tastes through the senses of the

character, knows his/her thoughts and speech patterns. Can be more realistic than a purely omniscient POV.

Con: Has some of the same limitations imposed by first person narrative.

Third Person Limited Changing POV is used for more sophisticated MG and YA novels.

Pro: can be exciting and reveal many sides of a story.

Cons: Can be confusing, very difficult to do well for younger readers.

Exercise in Point of View:

Zooming In—developing a more believable Limited Third Person Narrator

1. Write two or three very descriptive sentences about what *your* kindergarten or first grade class or experience was like—in **third person**.
2. Now rewrite the same paragraph—in **first person**, keeping in mind that you are five or six years old and can't possibly understand that the teacher draws the hands of her pilgrim like a mitten because she can't draw fingers, is grumpy because she spilled paint on her blouse, or that the reason there's only one black kid in your class is that integration hasn't happened yet in your town. Think about the words you are using. Would a six year old really use the words *linoleum* or *memorize*? For a moment, *be* a six-year-old.
3. Now, rewrite your paragraph—back into **third person**. Which version do you like best? Did you find that you didn't simply go back to the first draft, but made edits?