

# POINT OF VIEW

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### **Introduction**

The point of view of any piece of writing is defined as the perspective from which it is written. Point of view can be classified three different ways:

- A. First Person (*I or we*)
- B. Second Person (*you*)
- C. Third Person (*He, she, it, one, they, or any noun*)

### **Target Audience**

When considering which point of view to use in your writing, one must take into account the *intended target audience*. The target audience is defined as the individual (or group of individuals) for whom you are writing the piece.

The concept of *target audience* can perhaps be best illustrated in the practice of business communication. Suppose you are a sales executive for an organization. You have missed your sales quota of Nike Air Jordan shoes for the month due to a manufacturing problem with one of your factories overseas in Japan. Japan has suffered from a tsunami, and the resulting damage has caused a disruption in your production at the factory. As the sales manager, you are responsible for the production of goods and services for your company, and must now relay the bad news about the situation. You must not only relay the information to your boss but also to your consumer base. In order to retain goodwill, you must then consider the needs of two different groups.

Your superiors may prefer that you relay the information in a direct manner, proposing solutions and offering instances of past success with such methods. As leaders of the organization, they are already fully vested in the company and will continue to lead even in the midst of trying times. The loyalties of your consumer base are in greater question because of the simple fact that they could now choose to buy shoes from competing businesses. You must do your part to make the customers feel valued, “buffering” the bad news and provide reasonable alternatives to serve their needs.

We will return to this example in a later exercise; for now, let it serve as a reminder of the importance of *target audience* and how it works to shape the point of view of your piece, whether in business or expository writing.

### ***First Person Point of View***

If you are writing based on personal experience, as is the case for many college memoir classes, the first person point of view might work best, as it emphasizes ***the writer***. The first person point of view allows the writer to inject emotion and purpose into the piece, as they control the flow of the action. As the narrator, they have detail exclusivity, meaning that they are privy to the surrounding events

(both the physical action and the personal thought processes associated with that action) of the personal experience.

### **Limits to the First Person Point of View**

While the reader is privy to the motivations surrounding the thoughts, words, and deeds of the writer (or his main character) the knowledge that the reader can gain from the context of the story is limited to that one character. They do not know for certain what another character may be thinking in response to a certain situation, except how the narrator may interpret his actions. For this reason, we must understand that the narrator may be reliable or unreliable.

One should not use first person when writing papers because it is too informal and not professional. Remember that essays are one's own thoughts and ideas about a certain subject, so there is no need to use "I think..." or "I believe..." This is implied simply by the nature of your essay.

### **Reliability**

The extent to which a first-person narrator may be reliable or unreliable is an important concept in analysis of point of view. An unreliable cannot be trusted. They speak out of ignorance and bias, and are often used by the author to create a shroud of mystery over the story. They lie, and make many mistakes, often left unbeknownst to the reader throughout the majority of the story because of the singular nature of this point of view. Therefore, the presence of a first-person narrator may present a significant challenge to the reader. They must take the information given to them and try and discern fact from fiction. By asking yourself, "What is the narrator not telling me?" or "How might my perspective of the story change if told from a different point of view?" we can help to improve both our analytical skills as well as our writing ability.

### **Examples of First Person Narration**

1. I was minding my own business when Mom burst in. "What's with you?" I grumbled.
2. Our Senior Capstone class took the Major Field Test on Tuesday. The test was made up of multiple-choice questions. We were tested on our knowledge of concepts related to

accounting, finance, marketing, statistics and the legal environment. I looked around the room to see the faces of my classmates, who were scratching their heads and deep in thought. They clearly were not prepared.

3. I almost cried when I forgot the lines to my speech for the treasurer of our student council. I noticed my teacher talking hurriedly to members of the faculty. A stern look sat upon his face. I thought to myself, "They must think I did not prepare well."
4. Our class listened to a lecture on the proper procedure for evacuation during an emergency. We were instructed to line up and exit in an orderly and calm fashion. Our class then practiced the drill. Once outside, however, I found not the usual silence that comes with following orders, but the loud, chattering mouths of hungry teenagers waiting for recess.
5. As she listened to the sweet sound of the piano during my sister's recital, my mother slowly closed her eyes and breathed in a long sigh. I sensed she was at peace. But when my sister missed one of her notes, a look of horror crept over her face. She looked pale, and as if she had seen a ghost. She was clearly upset.

### ***Second Person Point of View***

The second person point of view allows the writer to tell the story using the point of view of the addressee. The writer takes the guise of the addressor and tells the story to another character. In this point of view, the pronouns **you**, **your** and **yours** are used to address the reader or listener in a direct fashion.

It is not often seen in fiction writing, but is very common in short pieces of non-fiction such as speeches and letters. It is also used to construct "how-to" tutorials.

### **Limits to the Second Person Point of View**

Use of the second person point of view can be emotionally affective for the reader, but a writer must vary his prose in order to keep the reader engaged. There is the danger of repetition that exists when using this point of view. For example, if recounting a scene piece by piece, the following can happen:

"But what happens if you choose to follow him through the door? You run to the door, turn the knob, and open to perpetual darkness. You turn on the light, but

are greeted only by the creaking sound of the footsteps on the ground. You look left, then right, and all at once realize the horrible truth: you have let him escape.”

There is enough detail in the passage to keep the reader’s attention, but without it, the piece becomes a shell of its former self:

“You follow him through the door. You turn the knob. You are greeted with an empty room. You turn on the light. You see nothing. You look left. You look right. He must be upstairs, you decide. You run up the stairs to find him waiting for you.”

Vary your sentence constructions to ensure that this does not happen.

## **Reliability**

The second-person POV allows the reader to engage in a conversation with the writer, giving an emotional appeal to the piece. It puts the reader in the center of the action. More often than not, the writer is attempting to sway the reader to his way of thinking, using analogies and metaphors to draw the reader in. Thus, there is a greater chance of the reader responding positively to the piece because it is all the more relatable.

## **Examples**

1. "You have brains in your head. You have feet in your shoes. You can steer yourself any direction you choose. You’re on your own. And you know what you know. And YOU are the guy who’ll decide where to go."  
(Dr. Seuss, *Oh! The Places You’ll Go!* 1990)
2. You walk into the cave and hear a low rumble. “What is it?” you wonder.
3. When you see her dressed like that, you think to yourself “What was she thinking?”
4. “You are not the kind of guy who would be at a place like this at this time of the morning. But here you are, and you cannot say that the terrain is entirely unfamiliar, although the details are fuzzy.” (Jay McInherney, *Bright Lights, Big City*, 1984)

5. "[W]hen television is bad, nothing is worse. I invite each of you to sit down in front of your television set when your station goes on the air and stay there, for a day, without a book, without a magazine, without a newspaper, without a profit and loss sheet or a rating book to distract you. Keep your eyes glued to that set until the station signs off. I can assure you that what you will observe is a vast wasteland."  
(Newton N. Minow, "Television and the Public Interest." Speech to the National Association of Broadcasters in Washington, D.C., on May 9, 1961)

The second person POV is also common used in advertisements:

1. "If you use our new hair restoration shampoo, your hair will grow back in no time!"
2. Using Joint Juice will allow you to exercise like Hall-of-Fame quarterback Joe Montana.
3. If you drink Bud Light, you are drinking the official beer of the NFL.

### ***Third Person Point of View***

If you were to observe the action from a distance, the point of view most likely utilized would be the third person point of view. The participants of the action in this piece would be referred to with pronouns such as "he," "she," and "they."

This category of POV can be separated in three different ways:

- Third-Person Objective – the facts of the situation are reported as such by a neutral and impersonal observer. The most common use of this approach may be seen in biographies, where authors recount historical facts about certain individuals. The nature of history dictates (in most cases) that a biography presents the facts impartially.
- Third-Person Omniscient – An all-knowing narrator comments on the action from afar and can choose to interpret the motivations behind such actions as well as the thoughts and feelings of any character at any time.
- Third-Person Limited – A narrator chooses to dictate the action of the story through the eyes, ears and thoughts of a single character.

### **Limits to the Third Person Point of View**

A writer may choose to employ variable or multiple third-person point of view, in which they view the action through the lens of multiple characters. Owing to the challenges that the first-person point of view presents, writers can often get caught up in the thoughts, words and actions of multiple characters, which can limit the effectiveness of the piece. One of the most important factors in determining the point of view is consistency. The reader can easily be lost within the context of the story if the writer is not consistent in the point of view. Similarly, readers can get lost if they are presented with the thoughts of multiple characters. To fully engage the reader in the piece, readers should be left unaware of the motivations of some characters. In this way, the reader can become more emotionally involved in the piece as they try to determine what happens next.

## **Reliability**

Third-person POV is used to establish a significant distance between the writer and the reader. Its use should be a key to the reader that the writer is seeking to establish himself as an authority on the subject and wishes to separate himself from the action so that he may present all sides of the story as objectively as possible. Third-person is most often used in:

- Reports
- Research papers
- Articles
- Non-fiction
- Business communication
- Fiction

## **Examples**

### **Fiction**

1. When Jane and Elizabeth were alone, the former, who had been cautious in her praise of Mr. Bingley before, expressed to her sister how very much she admired him. (Pride & Prejudice, Jane Austen, 1813)

### **Research Paper**

2. One of the first biotechnology products to be developed by Monsanto was recombinant bovine somatotropin. Known to consumers as Posilac, the synthetic growth hormone helped to increase milk yields in lactating cows by as much as fifteen percent.

### **Business communication**

3. A few years ago, when a tsunami caused damage to much of Japan, Nike's charitable arm pledged \$1 million toward the construction of community centers for Japanese townships. . The efforts helped to revitalize the community, and led to a 30 percent increase in sales of the LinSanity brand, our newest line of shoes by New York Knicks shooting guard Jeremy Lin.

### **Report**

4. The Silicon Valley suffered from high employment rates during the recent economic downturn, and the development of such a plant would provide for almost 4000 new positions within the technology industry.
5. Environmental reports from the Synterex plant in San Jose have shown almost a ten percent decrease in the amount of sulfur and nitrogen released in the air over a 10-year period from 2000 to 2010. Synterex has already promised to hire a biologist to monitor the effects of plant operations on the natural wildlife in the surrounding community in Santa Cruz.

### **Exercises**

**What is the point of view in this passage? Use either first, second or third person POV.**

1. "What are you doing?" Yossarian asked guardedly when he entered the tent, although he saw at once.

"There's a leak here," Orr said. "I'm trying to fix it."

"Please stop it," said Yossarian. "You're making me nervous."

"When I was a kid," Orr replied, "I used to walk around all day with crab apples in my cheeks. One in each cheek."

Yossarian put aside his musette bag from which he had begun removing his toilet articles and braced himself suspiciously. A minute passed. "Why?" he found himself forced to ask finally.

Orr tittered triumphantly. "Because they're better than horse chestnuts," he answered.

(Catch 22, Joseph Heller, 1961)

## 2. How to Make a Sand Castle

Making a sandcastle is a favorite project of beach-goers of all ages. Begin by digging up a large amount of sand (enough to fill at least six pails) and arranging it in a pile. Then, scoop the sand into your pail, patting it down and leveling it off at the rim as you do. You can now construct the towers of your castle by placing one pailful of sand after another face down on the area of the beach that you have staked out for yourself. Make four towers, placing each mound twelve inches apart in a square. This done, you are ready to build the walls that connect the towers. Scoop up the sand along the perimeter of the fortress and arrange a wall six inches high and twelve inches long between each pair of towers in the square. By scooping up the sand in this fashion, you will not only create the walls of the castle, but you will also be digging out the moat that surrounds it. Now, with a steady hand, cut a one-inch square block out of every other inch along the circumference of each tower. Your spatula will come in handy here. Of course, before doing this, you should use the spatula to smooth off the tops and sides of the walls and towers.

3. I saw the bear out of the corner of my eye. I slowly moved forward, careful to make little sound as I moved across the barren landscape. There was a *Crunch!* underfoot. I had stepped on a pile of leaves! The bear looked around, agitated. His eyes locked into mine. He had seen the boy who would become his new prey. I stood still and waited for the inevitable death.
4. "We were factitious and overpaid. Our mornings lacked promise. At least those of us who smoked had something to look forward to at ten-fifteen. Most of us liked everyone, a few of us hated specific individuals, one or two people loved everyone and everything. Those who loved everyone were unanimously reviled."

(Then We Came to the End, Joshua Ferris, 2007)

Rephrase the point of view for the given perspective.

### 1. **First Person**

"What are you doing?" Yossarian asked guardedly when he entered the tent, although he saw at once.

"There's a leak here," Orr said. "I'm trying to fix it."

"Please stop it," said Yossarian. "You're making me nervous."

"When I was a kid," Orr replied, "I used to walk around all day with crab apples in my cheeks. One in each cheek."

Yossarian put aside his musette bag from which he had begun removing his toilet articles and braced himself suspiciously. A minute passed. "Why?" he found himself forced to ask finally.

Orr tittered triumphantly. "Because they're better than horse chestnuts," he answered.

(Catch 22, Joseph Heller, 1961)

### 2. **Third Person**

Making a sandcastle is a favorite project of beach-goers of all ages. Begin by digging up a large amount of sand (enough to fill at least six pails) and arranging it in a pile. Then, scoop the sand into your pail, patting it down and leveling it off at the rim as you do. You can now construct the towers of your castle by placing one pailful of sand after another face down on the area of the beach that you have staked out for yourself. Make four towers, placing each mound twelve inches apart in a square. This done, you are ready to build the walls that connect the towers. Scoop up the sand along the perimeter of the fortress and arrange a wall six inches high and twelve inches long between each pair of towers in the square. By scooping up the sand in this fashion, you will not only create the walls of the castle, but you will also be digging out the moat that surrounds it. Now, with a steady hand, cut a one-inch square block out of every other inch along the circumference of each tower. Your spatula will come in

handy here. Of course, before doing this, you should use the spatula to smooth off the tops and sides of the walls and towers.

### 3. **Third person omniscient**

I saw the bear out of the corner of my eye. I slowly moved forward, careful to make little sound as I moved across the barren landscape. There was a *Crunch!* under foot. I had stepped on a pile of leaves! The bear looked around, agitated. His eyes locked into mine. He had seen the boy who would become his new prey. I stood still and waited for the inevitable death.

### 4. **Second person**

"We were factitious and overpaid. Our mornings lacked promise. At least those of us who smoked had something to look forward to at ten-fifteen. Most of us liked everyone, a few of us hated specific individuals, one or two people loved everyone and everything. Those who loved everyone were unanimously reviled."

(Then We Came to the End, Joshua Ferris, 2007)

## **Answer Key**

1. **Third-person objective**
2. **Second person**
3. **First person**
4. **First person**

Rephrase the point of view for the given perspective.

### 1. **First Person**

I saw Orr fiddling with something as I walked through the tent. "What are you doing?" I asked.

"There's a leak here," Orr said. "I'm trying to fix it."

I knew that what he was doing was dangerous, and immediately my nerves settled in. My body started to shake. I asked him to stop, but he refused.

"When I was a kid," Orr replied, "I used to walk around all day with crab apples in my cheeks. One in each cheek."

I put aside my musset bag and the various toiletries which I had carefully removed from the bag. The two of us sat there stunned in silence, almost goading the other to speak first. Finally, I stepped up to bat. "Why?" I asked hesitantly.

Orr tittered triumphantly. "Because they're better than horse chestnuts," he answered.

## **2. Third Person**

He watched over the sandbank as the young man began to construct his sandcastle. He began by digging up a large amount of sand (enough to fill at least six pails) and arranging it in a pile. Then, he scooped the sand into his pail, patting it down and leveling it off at the rim. He then constructed the towers of his castle by placing one pailful of sand after another face down on the area of the beach. In total, he made four towers, placing each mound twelve inches apart in a square. The young man then gathered the pieces needed to build the walls of his tower. He patted wet sand down to form his foundation - the perimeter of the fortress - and ended up building a wall as much as six inches high. He left twelve inches between each wall. As he finished the wall, he started building the moat that would surround his fortress. As he completed the base of his project, he used a spatula to fortify the tops and edges of the walls and towers

## **3. Third person omniscient**

Eric saw a bear out of the corner of his eye. His mind was in a panic. He gulped, and pictures of his youth flashed before his eyes. The first time he rode a tricycle. The very first moment he held the limp body of his baby brother in his arms. He did not want these moments to define his life. He resolved to face the bear. Slowly arching forward, he was careful to make little sound as he moved across the barren landscape. The sound of dry, crumpled leaves stopped him in his track. Lifting his shoe, he found the impression of a leaf. He had stepped on a pile just inches from where the bear was standing. The bear looked around, agitated. His eyes met Eric. With a determined look on his face, he slowly began to circle the boy. Eric stood still and waited for the inevitable death.

## **4. Second person**

"What is the life of a office worker like? You all have experienced the doldrums of the morning. You arrive at 8:55 and run from the parking lot for your morning meeting. Once again, you are disappointed. Once again, you did not receive the promotion. And to think! What else do you have to look forward to? Lunch is not until midday, and you don't smoke. Your coworkers that do enjoy a small smoke break at 10:15. Is that fair? You sit there and daydream, watching the soft tick of the clock with every passing second. You look around. Your cubicle mate is busy at work, putting in the time that inevitably comes with a move to project manager. Why could it not have been you? You have been here for 15 years and yet

there are some individuals in higher positions that have been here all but two years. When will it be your time? All at once you realize that you envy those who you work with. But that is alright. If you loved everyone, you would be hated by all.”

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