

## First Person is Not the First Guy Standing in Line: Understanding Point of View (POV)

First person POV tells the story through the filters of a particular person, rather than an unnamed observer, as is typical in third person POV. First person allows the reader to form a strong bond with the narrator of the story by providing direct access to the narrator's thoughts, feelings, and motivations.

"To say I was moved is an understatement, but I fought back my surprise and fear and presented what I hoped was a calm, almost disinterested demeanor."

This bond is said to be stronger than with stories using other POVs.

"Harry fought to hide his surprise and fear. He pretended to be unmoved by her proclamation." (Limited third person POV.)

The narrator, an "I" or a "we," tells the entire story without ever seeing into the minds or hearts of the other characters. Their thoughts, feelings, and motivations can only be observed or "guessed" by the narrator.

"He held his cards close to his vest leaving me to wonder what he was holding. I tried to recall his draws and discards before I decided whether to call or fold." (First person POV.)

The narrator is typically a character in the story, but does not have to be a main character. He or she may be an observer as was Nick Carraway in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. Carraway is considered an "unreliable narrator" because what he says and does are different. For instance, early on he says he does not judge people and then spends the rest of the book judging people. This was not an error on Fitzgerald's part. He used well the unreliable narrator as a literary device.

If the narrator is a "we," a group consciousness, the writer needs to know the common beliefs, agreements, philosophies, goals, expectations of the group. This can be an actual group or a created group. Steven King created a group consciousness based on religious beliefs for *Children of the Corn*. An actual group could be an army or a corporation.

"We marched and marched until our feet came through the worn soles of our boots. We didn't care. This was our duty. We kept marching." ("We" narrator first person POV.)

Some writers create a persona or "mask" to tell the story. The persona is not an actual character. It is a device through which the author expresses beliefs or views, which may or may not be the same as the author's. For example, the persona may express an opposite view to the extreme so the reader will become angry at the persona's view and adopt the author's real, though unspoken, belief. Be careful when using a persona as this style can become intrusive.

The intrusive author-style was often used by authors during the 18th and 19th centuries. It has been infrequently used in contemporary literature, though several well-know authors have parodied the style, as did John Fowles in the *French Lieutenant's Woman*. This style injects first person comments that are not a part of the story directly into the fiction. It pulls the reader out of the story and creates distance, not a good thing.

"Here we are at page 100 and, as the author, I want to tell you how hard I've worked to bring to you this masterpiece. Each morning, I awaken at five and sit with fingers poised on the typewriter keys until the muse strikes. Whether she strikes or not, I stop working at noon."

The first person POV story can be told in past tense or present tense.

"I place the key in the ignition and turn it. I'm hearing a funny noise? Sounds like the ignition is dying." (First person, present tense.)

"I stuck the key in the ignition and turned it. I heard a funny noise. Sounded like the ignition was dying." (First person, past tense.)

A challenge when using this POV is to *not* slip into unlimited POV.

"Before she turned the corner to the street where I was waiting, she stopped and checked her appearance in a store window." (A slip from first person to unlimited POV.)

First person POV is used in works employing letters, journal and diary entries, emails, and tape and phone conversation transcripts.

Setting descriptions in first person POV are limited to information the narrator would notice, such as items that changed in a familiar setting, a new setting, and something that affects present action.

Voice in first person works is generally not the author's own voice. The author creates a voice based on the character's or narrator's history, educational level, and regional or national origin. This is done through creating distinctive word choice and rhythm.

"I did as she bid because I needed time to collect my thoughts. When I lifted the glass to my lips and took a sip of the wine, I noticed that beneath the sweet bouquet was a decidedly bitter aftertaste, and wondered if she had served me spoilt wine." (First person in Gothic voice.)

First person POV is widely used in contemporary literary fiction. Some category fiction houses reject all but stories told in third person. Lately, that dictate has been softening.

First person POV is both easier and more challenging than third person POV. Easier because it's the way we naturally think. More challenging because of it being limited to what a narrator can think, feel, and observe. The selection of a POV is intuitive to and should be left to the writer to determine.

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