Point of View

The primitive storyteller, unbothered by considerations of form, simply spun a tale. "Once upon a time," he began, and proceeded to narrate the story to his listeners, describing the characters when necessary, telling what they thought and felt as well as what they did, and interjecting comments and ideas of his own. The modern writer is artistically more self-conscious. He realizes that there are many ways of telling a story; he decides upon a method before he begins, and may even set up rules for himself. Instead of telling the story himself, he may let one of his characters tell it for him; he may tell it by means of letters or diaries; he may confine himself to recording the thoughts of one of his characters. With the growth of artistic consciousness, the question of **point of view**, of who tells the story, and, therefore, of how it gets told, has assumed special importance.

To determine the point of view of a story we ask, "Who tells story?" and "How much is he allowed to know?" and, especially, "To what extent does the author look inside his characters and report their thoughts and feelings?"

Though many variations and combinations are possible, the basic points of view are four, as follows:

Omniscient	
Limited Omniscient	major character minor character
First Person	major character minor character
Objective	

1. In the **omniscient point of view** the story is told by the author, using the third person, and his knowledge and prerogatives arc unlimited. He is free to go wherever he wishes, to peer inside the minds and hearts of his characters at will and tell us what they are thinking or feeling. He can interpret their behaviour; and he can comment, if he wishes, on the significance of the story he is telling. He knows all. He can tell us as much or as little as he pleases.

The following version of Aesop's fable "The Ant and the Grasshopper" is told from the omniscient point of view. Notice that in it we are told not only what both characters do and say, but also what they think and feel; also, that the author comments at the end on the significance of his story. (The phrases in which the author enters into the thoughts or feelings of the ant and the grasshopper have been italicized; the comment by the author is printed in small capitals.)

Weary in every limb, the ant tugged over the snow a piece of corn he had stored up last summer. *It would taste mighty good at dinner tonight.*

A grasshopper, *cold and hungry*, looked on. *Finally he could bear it no longer*. "Please, friend ant, may I have a bite of corn?"

"What were you doing all last summer?'' asked the ant. He looked the grasshopper up and down. *He knew its kind.*

"I sang from dawn till dark,'' replied the grasshopper, *happily unaware of what was coming next.*

"Well," said the ant, *hardly bothering to conceal his contempt*, "since you sang all summer, you can dance all winter."

HE WHO IDLES WHEN HE'S YOUNG
WILL HAVE NOTHING WE HE'S OLD.

Stories told from the omniscient point of view may differ widely in the amount of omniscience the author allows himself. The omniscient is the most flexible point of view, and permits the widest scope. It is also the most subject to abuse. It offers constant danger that the author may come between the reader and the story, or that the continual shifting of viewpoint from character to character may cause a breakdown in coherence or unity. Used skilfully it enables the author to achieve simultaneous breadth and depth. Unskilfully used, it can destroy the illusion of reality which the story attempts to create.

2. In the **limited omniscient point of view** the author tells the story in the third person, but he tells it from the viewpoint of one character in the story. The author places himself at the elbow of this character, so to speak, and looks at the events of the story through his eyes and through his mind. He moves both inside and outside this character, but never leaves his side. He tells us what this character sees and hears, and what he thinks and feels; he possibly interprets the character's thoughts and behaviour. He knows everything about this character - more than the character knows about himself; but he shows no knowledge of what other characters are thinking or feeling or doing - except for what his chosen character knows or can infer. The chosen character may be either a major or minor character, a participant or an observer, and this choice also will be a very important one the story. The use of this viewpoint with a minor character is rare. Here is "The Ant and Grasshopper" told, in the third person, from the point of view of ant. Notice that this time we are told nothing of what the grasshopper thinks or feels. We see and hear and know of him only what the ant sees and hears and knows.

Weary in every limb, the ant tugged over the snow a piece of corn he had stored up last summer. *It would taste mighty good at dinner tonight. It was then that he noticed the grasshopper, looking cold and pinched.*

"Please, friend ant, may I have a bite of your corn?" asked the g grasshopper.

He looked the grasshopper up and down. What were you doing all last summer?" he asked. *He knew its kind*.

"I sang from dawn till dark," replied the grasshopper.
"Well," said the ant, *hardly bothering to conceal his contempt*, "since you sang all summer, you can dance all winter."

The limited omniscient point of view, since it acquaints us with the world through the mind and senses of only one person, approximates more closely than the omniscient the conditions of real life; it also offers a ready-made unifying element, since all details of the story are the experience of one person. At the same time it offers a limited field of observation, for the reader can go nowhere except where the chosen character goes, and there may be difficulty in having him naturally cognizant of all important events. A clumsy writer will constantly have his focal character listening at keyholes, accidentally overhearing important conversations, or coincidentally being present when important events occur.

3. In the first person point of view, the author disappears into one of the characters, who tells the story in the first person. This character, again, may be either a major or minor character, protagonist or observer, and it will make considerable difference whether the protagonist tells his own story or someone else tells it. The story below is told in the first person from the point of view of the grasshopper. (The whole story is italicized, because it all comes out of the grasshopper's mind.)

Cold and hungry, I watched the ant tugging over the snow a piece of corn he had stored up last summer. My feelers twitched, and I was conscious of a tic in my left hind leg. Finally I could bear it no longer. "Please, friend ant," I asked, "may I have a bite of your corn?
He looked me up and down. "What were you doing all last summer?" he asked, rather too smugly it seemed to me.
"I sang from dawn till dark," I said innocently, remembering the happy times.
"Well," he said, with a priggish sneer, "since you sang all summer, you can dance all winter."

The first person point of view shares the virtues and limitations of the limited omniscient. It offers, sometimes, a gain in immediacy and reality, since we get the story directly from a participant, the author as middleman being eliminated. It offers no opportunity, however, for direct interpretation by the author, and there is constant danger that the narrator may be made to transcend his sensitivity, his knowledge, or his powers of language in telling the story. A good author, however, can make tremendous literary capital out of the very limitations of his narrator. The first point of view offers excellent opportunities for dramatic irony and for studies in limited or blunted human perceptivity. Often, the very heart of the story may lie in the difference between what the narrator perceives and what the reader perceives. In such stories the author offers an interpretation of his materials indirectly, through the use of irony. He may also indicate his own judgment, more straightforwardly though still indirectly, by expressing it through the lips of a discerning and sympathetic narrator. Identifications of a narrator's attitude with the author's own, however, must always be undertaken with extreme caution; they are justified only if the total material of the story supports them.

James Joyce and other early moderns experimented with the stream-of-consciousness technique. We enter into the mind of the narrator, sharing in a flow of thought and feeling. We listen in on the interior monologue. The narrative is not linear or logical but moves by leaps and bounds of association. We may be distracted by bodily sensation (like the feel of a wet bar of soap in a trouser pocket.) We may be sent off on a tangent by a scent, or by a remark that rekindles a long-forgotten memory. Like our own private thoughts and feelings, the narrator's flow of thought is likely to circle back sooner or later to the hopes, anxieties or traumas that really matter.

4. In the **objective point of view** the author disappears into a kind of roving sound camera. This camera can go anywhere, but can record only what is seen and heard. It cannot comment, interpret, or enter a character's mind. With this point of view the reader is placed in the position of a spectator at a movie or play. He sees what the characters do and hears what they say, but can only infer what they think or feel and what they are like. The author is not there to explain. The purest example of a story told from the objective point of view would be one written entirely in dialogue, for as soon as the author adds words of his own, he begins to interpret through his very choice of words. Actually, few stories using this point of view are antiseptically pure, for the limitations it imposes on the author are severe. However, stories can be essentially objective in their narration, as is the following version of "The Grasshopper and the Ant." (Since we are nowhere taken into the thoughts or feelings of the characters, none of this version is printed in italics.)

> The ant tugged over the snow a piece of corn he had stored up last summer, perspiring in spite of the cold.
>
> A grasshopper, its feelers twitching and with a tic in its left hind leg, looked on for some time. Finally he asked, "Please, friend ant, may I have a bite of your corn?"
>
> The ant looked the grasshopper up and down. "What were you doing all last summer?" he snapped.
>
> "I sang from dawn till dark," replied the grasshopper, not changing his tone.
>
> "Well," said the ant, and a faint smile crept into his face, "since you sang all summer, you can dance all winter."

The objective point of view has the most speed and the most action; also, it forces the reader to make his own interpretations. On the other hand, it must rely heavily on external action and dialogue, and it offers no opportunities for interpretation by the author.

Each of the points of view has its advantages, its limitations, and its peculiar uses. Ideally the choice of the author will depend on his story materials and his purpose. He should choose the point of view which enables him to present his particular materials most effectively in terms of his purpose. If he is writing a murder mystery, he will ordinarily avoid using the point of view of the murderer or the brilliant detective: otherwise he would have to reveal at the beginning the secrets which he wishes to conceal till the end. On the other hand, if he is interested in exploring criminal psychology, the murderer's point of view might be by far the most effective. In the Sherlock Holmes stories, A. Conan Doyle effectively uses the somewhat imperceptive Dr. Watson as his narrator, so that the reader may be kept in the dark as long as possible and then be as amazed as Watson is by Holmes's deductive powers. In Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, however, the author is interested, not in mystifying and surprising, but in illuminating the moral and psychological operations of the human soul in the act of taking life; he therefore tells the story from the viewpoint of a sensitive and intelligent murderer.

For the reader the examination of point of view may be important both for understanding and for evaluating the story. First, he should know whether the events of the story are being interpreted by the author or by one of the characters. If the latter, he must ask how this character's mind and personality affect his interpretation, whether the character is perceptive or imperceptive, and whether his interpretation can be accepted at face value or must be discounted because of ignorance, stupidity, or self-deception.

Next, the reader should ask whether the writer has chosen his point of view for maximum revelation of his material or for another reason. The author may choose his point of view mainly to conceal certain information till the end of the story and thus maintain suspense and create surprise. He may even deliberately mislead the reader by presenting the events through a character who puts a false interpretation on them. Such a false interpretation may be justified if it leads eventually to more effective revelation of character and theme. If it is there merely to trick the reader, it is obviously less justifiable.

Finally, the reader should ask whether the author has used his selected point of view fairly and consistently. Even with the escape story, we have a right to demand fair treatment. If the person to whose thoughts and feelings we are admitted has pertinent information which he does not reveal, we legitimately feel cheated. To have a chance to solve a murder mystery, we must know what the detective knows. A writer also should he consistent in his point of view; or, if he shifts it, he should do so for a just artistic reason. The serious interpretive writer chooses and uses point of view so as to yield ultimately the greatest possible insight, either in fullness or in intensity.

(Source - *Story and Structure*)