

# Point of View

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A narrative may be told in the first, second, or third person, or from mixed viewpoints.

First person: **Little I ask; my wants are few . . .** —Oliver Wendell Homes.

Second person: **Call me Ishmael.** (*You* is understood.) —Herman Melville.

Third person: **But most he loved a happy human face.** —Leigh Hunt.

Mixed: **The skies they were ashen and sober . . . Thus I pacified Psyche and kissed her . . .** (Moves from third to first person.) —Edgar Allen Poe.

The first person is the most intimate, but confines the writer to the protagonist's p.o.v. The second person is usually an imperative form of the first person and may sound didactic or antiquated. (Dear Reader . . .) The third person has the advantage of mobility—can shift from one character to another—and can easily place the reader in a character's mind. Steinbeck, in *The Grapes of Wrath*, alternates the viewpoint:

The driver squinted judiciously ahead and built up the speed of the truck a little. "Goin' far?"

"Uh-uh! I'd a walked her if my dogs wasn't pooped out."

The questions of the driver had the tone of a subtle examination. He seemed to spread nets, to set traps, with his questions. "Lookin' for a job? he asked.

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The driver . . . waited to let the whole emphasis of the preceding passage disappear and be forgotten. At last, when the air seemed neutral again, he said, "A guy that never been a truck skinner don't know nothin' what it's like. Owners don't want us to pick up nobody. So we got to set here an' just skin her along 'less we want to take a chance of gettin' fired like I just done with you."

"Preciate it," said Joad.

## Some pitfalls:

- Needless shifts in subject or voice: **Joe liked pizza, but burgers were also enjoyed by him.** (Awkward: subject shifts from Joe to burgers, and voice shifts to passive.) **Joe liked pizza, but also burgers.** (Better: the subject doesn't shift, and both verbs are active.) Usually stay in one character's head throughout a section.
- Needless shifts in person: **We watched the earth shrink, and everyone felt a twinge of anxiety.** (Shift from first to third person.) **Watching the earth shrink, everyone [or *we*] felt a twinge of anxiety.** (No shift of person.)
- Needless shifts in number: **Each of the passengers was frisked and their luggage searched.** (*Each* is singular, *their* plural.) **All of the passengers were frisked, and their luggage was searched.** (Better: *All* and *their* are pleural.) Or: **Each of the passengers was frisked and his luggage searched.** (Sexist: use the awkward *his or her*.) Or: **Passengers were frisked and luggage was searched.**

Once you are in a character's head, thoughts needn't be placed in quotes or italics unless emphasis or direct quotation is intended. Keep point of view distinct at all times.

*She unlocked the front door and opened it quietly.* From this, Vince inferred that her parents had retired. Her hair, kindled by light from the hall, spilled to her shoulders like bright pennies.

To feel it just once, lush, warm in his hands! Her coat was open, and a glimpse of her bosom took his breath away. She backed off smiling as the massive door closed in his face. —Bill Carrigan,  
*The Burden of Matter*