

Narrative Voice and Perspective

Narrative Voice is named from the personal pronouns:

Singular	Plural
I	We
You	You
He, she, it	They

First Person Narrative Voice: The narrator is a character in the story and actually participates in the narrative. The story might be framed (see below) in which case the narrator's perspective is extended by time or distance from the story told. (*To Kill a Mockingbird*, *The Catcher in the Rye*) The benefit of first person narrative is that you get a very close-up and personal view of the character who is the narrator, but a detriment is that you have to remove the bias of the character's lens to see what might be construed as truth, or other characters' perspectives. We saw a bit of first person *plural* narrative voice at the end of the excerpt we read from Cormac McCarthy's *The Crossing*. Occasionally, many first person narrators will conspire to tell a story, or a series of stories, such as Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* or *The Joy Luck Club*, by Amy Tan.

Second Person: The narrator seems to be speaking directly to the characters in the story or the audience. This is a twenty-first century construction, mostly and I have yet to read a book written this way, although the recent film "My Life without Me" based on Nanci Kincaid's book of short stories, *Pretending the Bed is a Raft* is an example of second person narrative voice. (I just ordered this collection from Amazon. I'll let you know...) The premise of the film, which I also haven't seen ☺ is that a young woman discovers she has a terminal illness and begins to make a series of videos for her children (I think???) narrated in second person: "You will walk down the same street one day, but I won't be here with you" I suppose, would be an example of the narrative. (OK, so *most* of the time I have actually read the book... I don't make up dialogue from books I haven't read... Extra Credit if someone comes up with better examples from things you've actually read, or if anyone has actually seen this move, which got very bad reviews, let me know.)

This narrative voice connotes a peculiarly oneiric quality, and seems particularly suited for a kind of "guided personal meditation" story. It is kind of creepy having a narrator staring at you while you are reading the book!

Third Person, Omniscient: When it seems as if the narrator has access to everyone's thoughts and is everywhere. This is often described as a "god-like" (all-knowing) perspective. It is very interesting to note, however, that this might be either **objective (impersonal) or subjective (personal, and biased)**. With third person, omniscient, narrative view, there is no separate bona-fide character telling the story, although if subjective, the narrator certainly has a "persona" that is worthy of analysis as perspective.

Third Person Omniscient, subjective narrative perspectives are very common in the social realism novels of the late 19th century: Charles Dickens, Victor Hugo, Leo Tolstoy, where the

moral compass is drawn in very broad lines, and the narrative voice will point out precisely who is good, bad or ugly.

Third Person Omniscient, objective narrative perspectives arrive with the twentieth century. While the literary movement known as “naturalism” aspires to provide a “slice of ugly life” some authors move their narrator’s tone to benign indifference (objective) description, even of horrific events. Stephen Crane, Emil Zola, and Jack London are examples. Later on, Hemingway will virtually eliminate the omniscient and extremely objective narrator in *A Farewell to Arms*.

Third Person, limited is when the narrator seems to follow only one character’s perspective, yet allows you to see around the shoulders, so to speak, of this character. A wonderful benefit of this style of narrative voice is that while you go on the journey with the character, you get to see more than he or she does. Your eyes are inevitably opened more than the character’s you follow, and it creates a particular kind of intimacy you might have for a friend. We’ll see this in Jane Austen’s novels and the short stories in James Joyce’s *Dubliners*.

Third Person, intrusive is when the narrator is actually a bona-fide character created to tell the story, but is NOT a part of the narrative itself! This is a peculiarly 18th century construction that bleeds over stylistically in a tongue-in-cheek way into the 19th century, and in John Fowles’ *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*, in the 20th. Henry Fielding’s *Tom Jones* and later, William Makepeace Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair*, are examples of this technique.

Note: Charles Dickens likes to create personas of his narrators to walk us through his often symbolic settings and introduce us to his characters. This strong narrative persona creates a type of intrusion, although the narrative voice is never fully developed as a character. An example occurs in chapter 3 of *A Tale of Two Cities*, and in the first chapter of *Bleak House*.

Framed Narration: Framed narrative describes a situation where the story is being told from a different place or time, most often by someone who actually participated in the tales, but not always. Framed narration is a construction of plot; however, the separate setting of the “frame” offers a particular perspective shift as well.

If the story is first person narrative, the perspective that character in this case is widened by time and distance, as the storyteller has the ability now to reflect and comment on what took place. The narrator can learn from what happened and make digressions that connect with the story. This style is very popular with ghost stories, and 19th century Gothic novels, such as *Wuthering Heights* and *Frankenstein*, but is later also part of *Moby Dick* and *Heart of Darkness*.

If the characters who are in the frame are *not* at all participants in the story, this could be described as a type of “intrusive” narrative voice. (See below.) *The Princess Bride* would be an example of this.

Naturally, this is often the main element of memoir, not technically fiction, but is as David Sedaris aptly put it, the last place to look if you want to find truth.