Point of View

General Questions:

1. Is the author sympathetic or unsympathetic with the narrator?
2. How does the point of view enhance the story’s message? (author’s agenda)

Types of Point of View

1. **Third Person** or NON-PARTICIPANT Point of View
   
   Third person pronouns (he, him, she, her, they, them) are used to tell the story. The narrator is NOT a character in the work. The Third Person or Non-Participant Point of View can be subdivided into **three types**.

   A. **Third Person Objective**: No thoughts or feelings of characters are recorded. The narrator becomes a camera, recording actions and behaviors without comment or interpretation. This narrator cannot record thoughts or feelings. Readers must read between the lines to discover tone and thoughts behind words. Readers are not directly influenced by the author’s statements, and the readers’ perceptions are influenced more subtly by the author’s selection of diction and detail. (Sometimes called “Fly-on-the-Wall”)

   B. **Third Person Omniscient**: The all-knowing consciousness. The narrator can enter the minds of all the characters and express their inner thoughts or feelings. This POV allows great freedom that the narrator knows all there is to know about the characters both internally and externally.

      - The third person narrator describes what characters are feeling and thinking.
      - The third person narrator describes what the characters do.
      - The narrator may shift focus from the close view to the larger perspective.
      - The narrator may comment on events and characters, thus explaining their significance to the reader.

Indications of omniscience (in increasingly intrusive order):

a. Thoughts, feelings, perceptions of characters reported as the narrator, not character, understands them
b. Setting descriptions that do not arise from character’s actions
c. Identifications of characters on first appearance—introductions
d. Temporal summaries (what happened before or after)
e. Summary that epitomizes a character or event
f. Commentary from narrator
1) Explicit commentary

i) Interpretation—to explain the relevance or significance of an event or reaction

ii) Judgment—to evaluate on the basis of certain criteria held by the narrator

iii) Generalization—to apply significance from the narrative to the wider world

iv) Self-conscious narration—comments on the narration itself

2) Implicit commentary or ironic narration—Narrator is conscious of and intends irony; the butt of the irony is the character(s) or society described.

C. Third Person, Limited Omniscience—Narrator’s knowledge of thoughts, actions, visual perceptions, and feelings is limited to one or to a select few characters. The third person narrator knows everything about only one (or a select few) character.

- The story is portrayed through the eyes of one character, and there is a sense of distance from the other characters.
- The limited omniscient point of view approximates conditions of life in that only one character’s thoughts are known. The story is more unified through the use of this point of view.

2. First Person (PARTICIPANT)—Point of view is limited to the consciousness of a particular character(s). First person pronouns are used (I, me, my, we, us, our) to tell the story. The narrator may appear as a major character in the story (the story is told by the narrator and is chiefly about him), or the narrator may be a minor character in a story that chiefly focuses on someone other than himself, but he is still a character in the story.

- The first person point of view offers immediacy. The reader sees what is perceived by the individual “I”.
- The first person narrator can approach other fictional characters as closely as one human being can approach another.
- The first person narrator can be an eye-witness, observing what other characters say and do.
- The first person narrator can summarize events and retreat from a scene to mediate on its significance.
- The first person narrator requires that the reader is discerning; the reader must determine whether the narrator is trustworthy.
- The first person narrator understands other characters only by observing what they say or do. This narrator cannot enter the minds of the other characters and is unable to grasp their inner thoughts.
- The first person narrator outlines what a character observes and feels, and thus the narrator’s conclusions may be inaccurate.
The reader may question the validity and accuracy of the narrator’s opinions.

The first person point of view may contribute to dramatic irony; there can be a discrepancy between what the narrator knows and what the reader may understand.

**Indications of subjective viewpoint:**

a. Thoughts, feelings, and perceptions of the narrating character who refers to himself or herself as “I” are reported as they seem to that character, happening now. Focus is not only on the action but also on what the narrator makes of it.

b. Other characters (what they look like, what they do, what they think) appear only through the narrator’s consciousness.

**Special Types of Participant Point of View:**

A. **Innocent-Eye Narrator** or Naïve POV—the character telling the story may be a child or a developmentally disabled individual; the narrator is thus naïve. The contrast between what the innocent-eye narrator perceives and what the reader understands may produce an ironic effect.

B. **Stream of Consciousness** (interior monologue)—A narrative method in modern fiction in which the author tells the story through an unbroken flow of thought and awareness. The technique attempts to capture exactly what is going on in the mind of a character.

C. First Person Narrator relating events from a different time in the character's life (usually looking at the past often with wisdom, adult perspective, or additional knowledge). (Scout in To Kill A Mockingbird or Marguerite in I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings)

D. **Unreliable Narrator**—The reader must determine the reliability of the first person narrator through the author’s attitude toward the narrator.

Use the following criteria to determine the author’s attitude:

a. Reliable—Narrator is trustworthy, intelligent, insightful, involved, and knowledgeable guide.

b. Reliable/Unreliable—Narrator has limited capacities because of
   
i) Tunnel Vision—Narrator sees only one type of thing.
   
ii) Confused Emotions—Narrator’s involvement keeps him or her from being an accurate reporter.
   
iii) Naivete—Narrator is incapable of understanding what he or she reports. (See Innocent Eye Narrator)

c. Unreliable—Narrator is dishonest to make him or herself look good.

d. Unreliable—Narrator is a pawn of the author, i.e., manipulated to withhold information to provide suspense (detective stories, Saki’s stories).
The reader can also detect the narrator’s unreliability through inconsistencies in the narrator’s story:

i) Narrator has invalid presuppositions that distort his or her view.

ii) Narrator does not suppress certain facts that, when reported to the reader, are inconsistent with the narrator’s conclusions.

**Narrative Framework:**

1. Without frame—Events are reported as though they were happening just as the reader reads about them.
2. With frame—Narrator appears at beginning and usually at end of narrative to tell his or her story to listener(s) outside the main narrative (story).

**NOTE:**

A rarely used point of view in literature is the second person point of view. This narrative technique uses second person pronouns (you, your, yourself). Use of the second person point of view is uncommon because it directly involves the reader in the story, and the reader may be unwilling or unable to identify with the “you” in the story.

**REMEMBER:** An author may choose to use more than one point of view in a given work. Switching between different types of POVs requires skill and deliberate authorial intent.