Point Of View

Point of view provides the reader with a perspective about the events of a work of fiction. The author determines whose words are being read, where the narrator stands in relation to the events, and whether the events are viewed from a fixed or mobile position.

− The author’s choice of point of view is deliberate.
− A different point of view would change the story significantly.
− The author chooses the point of view for its precise effect on the meaning of the story.

An author may choose to use more than one point of view in a given work.

There are two basic types of point of view: participant and nonparticipant.

Participant Point of View

The participant point of view is also called the first-person point of view because first-person pronouns (I, me, my, we, us, our) are used to tell the story. The participant point of view can be further divided into two types:

− The narrator as a major character in the story (the story is told by the narrator and is chiefly about him).
− The narrator as a minor character (the narrator tells a story that focuses on someone other than herself, but she is still a character in the story).

A special type of participant narrator is called the innocent-eye narrator. The character telling the story may be child or a developmentally disabled individual; the narrator is thus naive. The contrast between what the innocent-eye narrator perceives and what the reader understands may produce an ironic effect.

Stream of consciousness (interior monologue) is 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.

Another special type of first-person or participant narrator involves different times in a character’s life (e.g. Scout in To Kill a Mockingbird or Marguerite in I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings).

Nonparticipant Point of View

The nonparticipant point of view is also called the third-person point of view because third-person pronouns (he, him, she, her, they, and them) are used to tell the story.

The nonparticipant point of view can be subdivided into three types:

− Omniscient narrator. The author enters the minds of all the characters.
− Selective (limited) omniscient narrator. The author limits his omniscience to the minds of a few of the characters or to the mind of a single character.
− Objective narrator. The author does not enter a single mind, but instead records what can be seen and heard. This type of narrator is like a camera or a fly on the wall.
Purposes of Participant Points of View
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 can approach another.
− The first-person narrator can be an eyewitness, observing what other characters say and do.
− The first-person narrator can summarize events and retreat from a scene to meditate on its significance.

The first-person point of view allows the reader to be discerning; the reader must determine whether the narrator is trustworthy.

− The first-person narrator understands other characters only by observing what they say and do. This narrator cannot enter the minds of the other characters and is unable to grasp their inner thoughts.
− The first 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 is a discrepancy between what the narrator knows and what the reader understands.

Purposes of the Nonparticipant Points of View
A. Omniscient Point of View
The omniscient point of view allows great freedom in that the narrator knows all there is to know about the characters, externally and internally.

− The third-person narrator describes what characters are feeling and thinking.
− The third-person narrator describes what 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.

B. Limited Omniscient Point of View
The author knows everything about a particular 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.

C. Objective Point of View
The objective point of view allows inferences to be made by readers through their observance of dialogue and external action. Readers are not directly influenced by the author’s statements. Readers’ perceptions are influenced more subtly by the author’s selection of diction and detail.