Mastering Point of View
Stan C. Smith

(Many of the following ideas and examples are borrowed from Gabriela Pereira's DYI MFA site)

Point of View (POV) is a major part of how you tell your story. Understanding the variations of POV allows you to choose the best variation for your specific story and your style.

Basic Categories:

1st Person:
The narrator is a character in the story. The "I/me" narrator.
I got into my car, then I realized I had forgotten how to drive.

3rd Person:
The narrator is NOT a character in the story. The "he/she/it" narrator.
She got into her car, then she realized she had forgotten how to drive.

2nd Person:
The narrator and the character are the reader. The "you" narrator
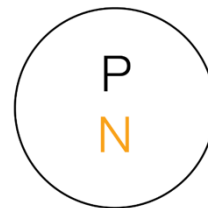*You get into your car, then you realize you have forgotten how to drive.*

However, there are plenty of variations of these. Let's take a look.

First Person Traditional
The narrator is the main character, the protagonist.
The narrator can only know what the protagonist knows!

Pros: - You can go deep into your protagonist's thoughts
         - You can create a strong sense of immediacy
Cons: - You can only go where your protagonist goes
         - You can only see what your protagonist sees

P = Protagonist
N = Narrator

"If you really want to hear about it, the first thing you'll probably want to know is where I was born, and what my lousy childhood was like, and how my parents were occupied and all before they had me, and all that David Copperfield kind of crap, but I don't feel like going into it, if you want to know the truth."
- *The Catcher In the Rye* by JD Salinger

First Person Peripheral
The narrator is still a character, but is not the protagonist.
Usually, the story is told by a friend or acquaintance of the protagonist.

Pros: The narrator can share things about the main character that
        even the main character doesn't know.
Cons: You can only tell events that happen to the main characters if the
        narrator character is actually there.
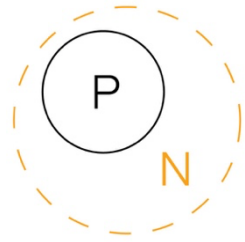

The Great Gatsby is an example. Nick, the narrator, is Gatsby's friend and neighbor.

Third Person Limited

Remember, in third person POV ("he/she/it" narrator), the narrator is *not* a character in the story.

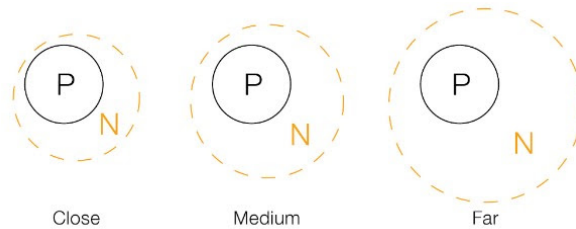*Limited* = the narrator is limited to the POV of only one character.

The narrator can know what the protagonist is thinking, but might also see some things the protagonist does *not* see.

Pros: Wider scope of knowledge than with first person.
You can describe the protagonist's appearance.
If you can master "narrative distance," it can be extremely effective. This allows you to zoom in on the character, or zoom out.

Cons: Mastering "narrative distance is a *challenge*! Many authors zoom in and out too abruptly.

Good practice: Try writing the same scene with three different variations of narrative distance.

Third Person Omniscient

The narrator sees all. The narrator can switch between the POVs of multiple characters.

This was popular in the 1800s ("Little did he know, dear readers, that danger awaited him around the next corner")

Pros: You can show the reader what is going on with any character. You can even show perspectives that none of the characters see!
Cons: One of the most challenging POVs to use effectively. If you jump around too much, the reader will not feel grounded. It will be confusing.
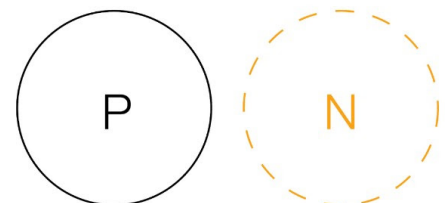Don't switch characters within one scene. Definitely not within a paragraph!
There are so many possibilities that the story quickly becomes a mess for the writer (and reader).

Good practice: Try retelling a fairy tale in third person omniscient, including the perspectives of numerous characters.

Third Person Objective

Pretty much the *opposite* of third person omniscient.
- The narrator has no access to any of the character's thoughts or emotions. The narrator can only describe how the characters look, or what they say or do. Everything else is left to the reader.
- Rare in *novels*, sometimes used in *short stories*, and almost always used in *films* and *screenplays* (unless there is a voiceover, such as in *Blade Runner*).

- Works best in stories where you do not want the reader to "choose sides." You want the reader to focus only on what the characters say and do, without commentary or internal thoughts—an objective view of all the events.
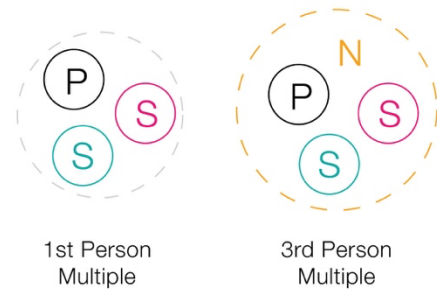
Pros: The reader can become more engaged because they can figure it out themselves.
Cons: If you can't show any thoughts or emotions, the reader may have a hard time relating to the characters. This is why it is rarely used in longer stories, like novels.

Multiple Points of View
This is an extension of *traditional first person* and the *limited third person*.
- In any given scene or chapter, you stick to the POV of the main character of that scene or chapter.
- However, you switch POV between scenes or chapters.
- This is how I have written all of my novels except for Savage (a journal written in first person).
- There are a LOT of different ways to do this.
- The most important thing to do is *be consistent*!

Pros: You can show scenes where the protagonist is not even present. A great way to show the mind of your antagonist (your villain).
Cons: It is difficult to *be consistent*! Make rules (like when you are going to switch POVs) and stick to them.
        Difficult to skillfully show the reader whose POV you are switching to. Make it obvious in the first sentence (or at least the first paragraph). Some authors use the POV character names for their chapter titles. Include the date and/or location as a header if you are switching time or place.
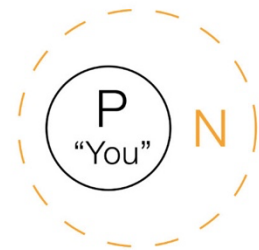

Second Person
The narrator is talking directly to the reader. The "you" narrator.
This is common in how-to and self-help books because the writer is giving the reader advice or instructions.
In fiction? Not common at all. Some short stories, *very* few novels.
In fiction, the reader is actually in the protagonist's shoes. The reader *is* the main character.

Pros: If done well, the reader is more engaged in the story.
        Could help the reader sympathize with an unlikeable character.
Cons: *Very* difficult to do well! And if it's not done well, the story can be difficult to read.

Example: *Bright Lights, Big City*.

Epistolary and Journal Forms
Epistolary: when a story is told through letters between characters (this can make the novel feel *real*)
Journal: when the story is told as the character's diary (*Bridget Jones' Diary*, my novel *Savage*).

A more modern twist could be a story told through emails or text messages!