

Understanding Point of View

Pamela Regis

An exercise that teaches the mechanics of narrative point of view.

Genre: *fiction*
Course Level: *any*
Student Difficulty: *moderate*
Teacher Preparation: *low*
Class Size: *small to medium*
Semester Time: *any*
Writing Component: *in class*
Close Reading: *medium*
Estimated Time: *50 minutes*

EXERCISE

Choose one or more passages from a work of fiction—five sentences from any novel or short story will do, but a longer passage will also work—and ask the class to determine the point of view that the author has employed. Project the passage on a screen or distribute it in a handout. Have students point out the pronouns that help identify the point of view. Beginnings are particularly useful passages for this exercise, because authors must establish a work's point of view immediately. Also useful are passages that report the thoughts of characters.

Next, solicit from the students a list of all the *other* point of view possibilities the author could have employed, and list these on the board. For example, a paragraph written in third-person omniscient could have been written in third-person objective or third-person limited. Include the various focal character possibilities as well. For example, the focal character in a third-person limited point of view could have been a major character or minor one. Or the passage could have been written in the second person, which, although rarely used, is helpful in this exercise, the goal of which is to uncover all of the other possibilities that the author could have employed. Finally, the passage could have been written in the first person with, again, any focal character recounting the events.

Now ask the students, either singly, in pairs, or in small groups, to rewrite the passage in one of the points of view that the author did not employ.

Assign each student (or group) a specific point of view. (If you have more students or groups than point of view possibilities, you can assign the same point of view more than once.) Students will have to figure out how to cut, supplement, or otherwise rework the details of the passage to follow the rules of the point of view they have been assigned. They should add or delete details in order to get as close to the original as possible while still observing the limitations imposed by the new point of view. Give students about fifteen minutes for this section of the exercise.

When the revisions are done, taking each revision in turn, invite the reviser(s) to present the new passage to the rest of the class. If possible, have revisers write the passage on a flip chart, display it on an overhead projector or via a document camera, or put it on a PowerPoint slide so that the whole class can see the rewrite.

Ask the class if the rewritten passage follows the rules of the new point of view. You can prompt them with questions: Have the pronouns been shifted appropriately? Have the rules of who is allowed to “think” in the new point of view been adhered to? Have limited or first-person points of view truly kept within the knowledge that the focal character could have had? Does third-person objective stay out of characters’ heads? In first person and third-person limited, has knowledge that the narrator knows but that a given character cannot know been deleted or attributed to a character in a plausible way?

Then ask the revisers to explain a few of the changes they had to make in order to rewrite the passage. What was lost? What was gained? How has the overall impact of the passage been changed by the rewriting?

Finally, ask the class several questions: What has the *reader* gained or lost by the shift? What information does he or she now have that the original did not include? What information has been lost that the original did include? Ask students whether or not the original author chose the best possible point of view, given the work’s focus and themes. If not, which point of view would have been more effective? Why? Repeat this sequence with the next rewritten passage. Allow roughly four to five minutes per student or group; in a fifty-minute class, for example, you can comfortably cover seven to eight rewritten passages.

For a variation on this exercise, have students prepare their rewrites for homework and bring them to the following class. This will eliminate the small-group discussion (unless you assign this as an out-of-class group activity) but will also give you more time to discuss the rewrites themselves during the class period.

REFLECTIONS

The goal of this hands-on exercise is to help students understand the nature of point of view and the control that it exercises over every aspect of a work of fiction. The exercise makes apparent the decisions that an author makes in deploying a given point of view, as well as the extent to which a reader’s

information about the events and characters in a work of fiction is a direct consequence of the point of view that the author has chosen. This exercise also provides a good introduction to modernist and postmodernist departures from traditional point of view, such as stream of consciousness.

Any work of fiction will provide a passage for rewriting. Take, for example, Terry L. Tilton's extremely brief short story, "That Settles That." Here it is in its entirety:

Tom was a handsome, fun-loving young man, albeit a bit drunk when he got into an argument with Sam, his room mate of just two months.

"You can't. You can not write a short story in just 55 words, you idiot!"

Sam shot him dead on the spot.

"Oh yes you can," Sam said, smiling.

For this particular story, before I assign complete rewrites, I ask the entire class to identify the two instances of description that we need to delete to change the omniscient narrator, who can see into characters' minds and souls, into an objective one, who limits the narration to what can be known through the senses, particularly sight and sound. Omit "fun-loving" and "a bit drunk," which require knowledge of Tom's inner states, and the third-person omniscient narration becomes objective.

Then I ask groups of students to rewrite the story, extending it beyond the fifty-five-word limit if they wish, and inventing details, as long as they observe the rules of the point of view they have been assigned. Different individuals or groups rewrite the story

- in the first person, using Tom as the focal character;
- in the first person, using Sam as the focal character;
- in third-person limited, using Tom as the character whose observations, thoughts, and impressions the reader is privy to;
- in third-person limited, using Sam as the character whose observations, thoughts, and impressions the reader is privy to;
- in third-person objective, which prohibits the narrator from reporting the inner state of any character; or
- in second person, a rarely used point of view, but useful for this exercise.

Students quickly realize that rewriting the story using first-person narration from the point of view of the shooter, Sam, permits them fairly wide latitude in drawing Sam's character, and that Sam is very much a filter for the reader's perception of Tom's character, assuming that Sam characterizes his victim at all. When Tom narrates, the opposite is true, and students realize that conveying "Sam shot him dead on the spot" from Tom's point of view presents them with a challenge, which they typically overcome using an ellipsis. The third-person limited rewrites permit students to provide the thoughts of the focal characters, and rewrites typically include the motives of Sam and Tom.

Third-person objective rewrites force students to confine the narration to the action only. (Raymond Carver deploys third-person objective point of view to chilling effect in “Popular Mechanics.”) The biggest challenge is to rewrite the story in the second person, which provides an opportunity to discuss the difficulties posed by this point of view. (See “Videotape” by Don DeLillo for a fine example of a second-person narrator: “You know about families and their video cameras,” DeLillo’s narrator explains.)

For English majors, I follow this exercise with a paper assignment that asks them to assess the contribution of point of view to the theme of a given work of fiction. If you’d like to offer your class an extended opportunity to explore the ways in which writers deploy point of view, consider pairing Joyce Carol Oates’s 1972 rewrite of Anton Chekhov’s 1899 short story “The Lady with the Pet Dog” with Chekhov’s original. Both authors employ third-person limited point of view. Chekhov uses the male protagonist as the focal character; Oates uses the female protagonist.

Flip the Script

Stephen M. Park

An exercise that teaches point of view through creative rewriting.

Genre: *fiction*

Course Level: *any*

Student Difficulty: *easy or moderate*

Teacher Preparation: *low*

Class Size: *small to medium*

Semester Time: *any*

Writing Component: *in class, optional after class*

Close Reading: *medium*

Estimated Time: *50 to 60 minutes*

EXERCISE

Choose a passage from the novel or short story your students are reading and ask them to review it before coming to class. The passage should be a page or two in length, though slightly longer passages can work for take-home versions of the exercise. Stories told in the third person work well: Charles