

Point of View Tutorial

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Definition: Point of view is the perspective the author uses in a piece of writing. It's the lens through which a story is told, or an academic essay is presented. First, second, and third point of view can be easily differentiated by the pronouns they use, as follows:

First: I/Me/My (or "we," if the paper has more than one author)

Second: You/your/yours

Third: He/Him/His, She/her/hers, They/them/theirs

Less common is the fourth person point of view, used for indefinite or generic referents (e.g. "One might," or "Defendant claims"). The point of view chosen for a piece of writing is of great importance, as it affects what information is conveyed. Different points of view carry different benefits, depending on the goal of the piece, though first and third person are most common in academic writing. An essay or story told in the first person might feel more intimate, vivid, and personal, immersing the reader in the thoughts and feelings of the narrator. Third person, on the other hand, carries the benefits of being able to "zoom out" and present the story/essay from a greater distance, accessing information a single first-person narrator might not have. Third person is more common for academic writing, but first is also acceptable in many academic contexts. In academic writing, the use of first person may strengthen and clarify an argument if the author's personal views have been a major influence on their approach to the topic, or their personal experience is highly relevant to their argument.

Note that choice of PoV does not confine the piece to a certain style: writing in first person is not necessarily personal/voice-driven, just as writing in the third person is not necessarily impersonal/academic. Second or fourth person can also have their uses, potentially within pieces written mostly in the first or third person; for example, if the author wants to propose a polemical counterargument to their own case ("You could say," or "One might think").

Distinction should be made between the third person omniscient and third person limited PoV. Third person omniscient has access to any and all information in a given story/essay: the third person omniscient is an "eye in the sky." Third person limited, by contrast, has access to only the perspective of one or more characters within a story, much as first person has access only to the perspective of the narrator (or narrators) of the piece.

Examples

Example of first person in Dianna Taylor, *Disappearing Acts: Spectacles of Gender and Nationalism in Argentina's "Dirty War"* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 9:

What struck me most about *Paso de dos*, however, was not the play's misogyny. Rather, it was my realization that this "progressive" play depicts the construction of national identity as predicated on female destruction, just as the military had done. Yet, I kept reminding myself as I sat on the bleachers, this was the opposition. But it became painfully evident to me that Pavlovsky's critique of the military was not antithetical to the work's misogyny. The misogyny, rather, was a fundamental bridge or slash connecting the military/antimilitary discourse.

Note how Taylor's critique emerges more forcefully when re-written in the third person, yet loses the relatability that comes from her using the first:

Paso de dos evinces a characteristic more striking than its misogyny: this "progressive" play depicts the construction of national identity as predicated on female destruction, just as the military had done. Though written from the opposition, Pavlovsky's critique of the military is not antithetical to the work's misogyny. The misogyny, rather, is a fundamental bridge or slash connecting the military/antimilitary discourse.

Example of combined first and third person in the materials and methods section of C. von Grothusen, et al., "Effect of mifepristone on the transcriptomic signature of endometrial receptivity," *Human Reproduction* 33, no. 10 (2018), 1891–92:

First, we filtered low expression genes and normalized the data using the TMM method. After the normalization step, we used the `prcomp` R function for a principal component analysis (PCA) in order to study the variability of the treated, control and proliferative groups (Fig. 1a–c). Hierarchical clustering analysis using `hclust` R function with a complete method was used to compute distance among the samples using the Euclidean approach (Fig. 1d). We obtained the differential expressed genes for three comparisons: control versus treated, proliferative versus treated and control versus proliferative.

Example of second person in a theater review that implicates the reader and casts them as a potential audience member in Sara Holdren, “Reviewing Fairview, a Play That Almost Demands That I Not Do So,” *Vulture*, June 17, 2018:

“The Frasier family is gearing up for Grandma’s birthday, and Beverly needs this dinner to be perfect,” beams the theater’s cagily anodyne marketing blurb. If you wandered in with only that to go on, you might spend 45 minutes thinking that you’re watching, as one of Drury’s characters says, “a good old family drama. A Slice of life...Nothing big and flashy, just [a] real story about real people.”

Historical shift in academic writing

In academic writing, there has been a shift in thinking about point of view. Historically, the third person was expected and/or required because it was considered more objective. This perspective resulted in writing from the point of view of the study itself (e.g., “results showed”, “this paper demonstrates”); *ipse*, or use of the third person in reference to oneself (e.g., “workers performed”, “the authors argue”); and passive voice (e.g., “samples were collected”, “it was shown”). Some of these sentence structures are now considered stylistically imprecise. In fact, the first person is now accepted, and even preferred, when writing about your actions in many fields. For example, the APA Style recommends using first person pronouns when referring to your actions in a study: “I” for single-authored work or “we” for multi-authored work. Because there are exceptions by field, journal, or section, it is important to reference style guidelines and example papers. For example, first person is still discouraged by some of the humanities sub-disciplines and in the methods section of scientific subdisciplines. Overall, it is important to be aware of the norms of your genre and field and make a conscious choice in your own writing.

Incorporating Multiple Perspectives in Your Paper

Whether you are writing a close analysis of a literary passage or a 90-page history thesis, you are likely to weave multiple sources, voices, and perspectives into your paper. You’ll incorporate ideas from other scholars, quote passages from primary sources, and build your own original claims based on an array of evidence.

It’s important to consider point of view as you interweave multiple sources within a single, cohesive paper. In essence, readers want to know when you are giving your own perspective (whether expressed in first- or third-person), and when you are summarizing someone else’s perspective.

Footnotes or parenthetical citations help accomplish some of this work, and there may be times when they are sufficient. For instance, in a paragraph providing background context, you might summarize the relevant information in third person, with citations as needed to give credit or recommend further reading.

Sometimes, however, your main text needs additional language to walk your reader smoothly through the shifting perspectives you've incorporated. As you read over your initial draft, you might ask yourself questions such as:

- Does my paper clearly indicate which ideas are my own original thoughts, interpretations, and arguments? Which ideas represent those of the primary or secondary sources?
- When I quote a passage from a source, is it clear...
 - ...what the source is?
 - ...what the main idea conveyed in the source is?
 - ...what my take on the source is?
- When citing other scholars, do I indicate the relationship between their work and mine? Am I building on their work, challenging it, or complicating it?
- Do I indicate when I am inside a primary source and writing from its perspective vs. taking on an outside perspective?

I'll explain what I mean by that last question with two sample passages:

Passage 1: Twelfth-century abbots often attempted to resign due to the **heavy burdens** of administrative duties and pastoral care. Many were too tired to continue in office and wanted to spend their time preparing for death. However, **these selfish desires** did not negate the abbot's obligations to his monastery and did not mean that retirement was indicated. Abbatial retirement **threatened to harm** the monastic community and even endanger the abbot's soul.

In this passage, the overall perspective is unclear: Am I, as the author, judging these medieval abbots for decisions I think were selfish? Do I personally believe that retirement was harmful, or that abbatial duties were indeed burdensome? Or am I simply reporting the general attitudes expressed in primary sources?

Passage 2: Twelfth-century abbots often attempted to resign, **citing** concerns such as burdensome administrative duties and demands for pastoral care. **Some expressed** general feelings of fatigue, often coupled with a strong desire to take care of their own spiritual needs in preparation for death. Yet **according to many twelfth-century writers**, abbatial retirement threatened to harm the monastic community and even endanger the abbot's soul. **I argue** that these debates on abbatial retirement...

This passage **adds language to frame the shifting points of view**: It indicates the different perspectives expressed in the **abbots' writing** and in writing by **authors who opposed retirement**. It becomes clear that I am not personally commenting on the morality of retirement or the validity of the abbots' complaints, but am instead summarizing a twelfth-century debate. I then shift to **my own historical argument** (in this case, with the first-person "I argue that..." though that could be omitted in favor of third-person narrative instead).

Expressing multiple perspectives clearly while maintaining a concise and fluid writing style takes practice. Adding too many phrases such as...

- "According to..."
- "Author X argues that..."
- "Many others asserted..."
- "As Book ABC suggests..."

...can make your prose feel clunky. But it is possible to use such phrases judiciously! One strategy is to use perspective-framing language when first introducing an author or work. The following sentences or even paragraphs can then continue "in the voice" of that author, without adding repeated reminders of who is "speaking." As you transition to discussing another author or your own ideas, you'll add a transitional phrase to indicate the new perspective.

References

Angelika Hofmann, Chapter 2: Fundamentals of Scientific Writing, Part I - Style, Writing in the Biological Sciences

Paul Silvia, Chapter 2 Tone and Style, Write It Up

Helen Sword, Chapter 4: Voice and Echo, Stylish Academic Writing