Point of View

What is Point of View?
Point of view refers to the position from which the events of a story are observed. The author establishes point of view through the use of characters, dialogue, actions, setting, and events. Authors rarely speak in their own voices. Instead, they assume a particular persona and adopt a "voice" that enables them to narrate their stories and novels. This voice is called point of view.

Common Points of View:
1. **Omniscient**
2. **Limited Omniscient**
   - Major character
   - Minor character
3. **Objective**
4. **First Person**
   - Major character
   - Minor character

1. Omniscient:
The story is told in the third person ("he," "she," "it") by a narrator who knows everything about the characters, actions, and events. The narrator is able to move in time and place, to shift from character to character, and to reveal or conceal as little or as much as he or she pleases. This type of narrator is "all knowing."

Example from "Godfather Death":
   "He ought to have remembered his godfather's warning."

   (The narrator has unlimited knowledge, even knowing the mind of Death, and he comments on and evaluates the doctor as he is dying.)

2. Limited Omniscient:
The story is also told in the third person, but only from the viewpoint of a single character, whether a major or minor one. The author selects which character to see through, and the narrator is confined to knowing only the thoughts and actions of that character. Such a character is the "lens" through which events pass in the story.

Example from Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*:
   "Charles went upstairs to see the patient. He found him in bed, seating under blankets, his nightcap lying where he had flung it….The fracture was a simple one, without complications of any kind. Charles couldn't have wished for anything easier.

Then he recalled his teachers' bedside manner in accident cases, and proceeded to cheer up his patient…."

(It is only through Charlie's eyes that readers "see" and learn about the patient.)

3. Objective:

The story is told in third person, but the narrator does not enter the mind of any character. The narrator objectively describes events from the outside. The reader is left to infer the character's inner thoughts and feelings. The narrator knows which details to use to communicate deep meaning.

Example from Dashiell Hammett's the *Maltese Falcon*:
"Spade's thick fingers made a cigarette with deliberate care, sifting a measured quantity of tan flakes down into curved paper, spreading the flakes so that they lay equal at the ends with a slight depression in the middle…."

(Readers must infer that Spade is deliberate, cool, efficient, and painstaking during a crisis; the author never uses those adjectives to describe Spade.)

4. First Person:

The story is told in first person ("I"), through the thoughts and feelings of the narrator, not anyone else's. What reaches the reader is subjective. So, more important than whether the narrator is a major or minor character is the narrator's reliability. An unreliable narrator can present a distorted picture of events; a reliable one can render events with accuracy.

Example from Aesop's *Ant and the Grasshopper*:
"Cold and hungry, I watched the ant tugging over the snow a piece of corn he had stored up last summer. My feelers twitched, and I was conscious of a tic in my left hind leg. Finally I could bear it no longer. 'Please, friend ant,' I asked, 'may I have a bit of your corn?"

(Readers only know the thoughts and feelings of the grasshopper. They know nothing about what the ant thinks or how the ant feels.)

Determining Point of View:

The attitudes and opinions of a narrator aren't necessarily those of the author. Don't confuse a character with the author. To determine point of view, ask who the narrator is and what pronoun the author attaches to the narrator. Also ask yourself what role, if any, the narrator plays. By using a particular point of view, an author determines how much the narrator reveals about the characters.

Remember:

Point of view refers to the position from which the events of a story are observed. The author establishes point of view through the use of characters, dialogue, actions, setting, and events. There are four common points of view: omniscient, limited omniscient, objective, and first person.