

A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO NARRATIVE POINT OF VIEW IN CRIME WRITING

CONTENTS

What is narrative point of view?

Why should you bother nailing POV?

Narrative point of view in action

1. Third person

(A) Third-person limited

(B) Third-person objective

2. First person

3. Omniscient

Introductions

Freedom to roam quickly

Tension

What omniscient is not

Summary

Further reading

If you're not sure what a narrative point of view is, or how to use it effectively in your crime writing, this ebooklet is for you.

WHAT IS NARRATIVE POINT OF VIEW?

Point of view (POV) describes whose head we're in when we read a book or, put another way, from whose perspective we discover what's going on – and the smells, sounds, sights and emotions involved.

There can be multiple viewpoints in a book, not all of which have to belong to a character. And to complicate things, editors' and authors' opinions differ as to which approach works best, and what jars and why.

In this article, I'll review the most-oft-used POVs and show you examples from published crime fiction. I'll also explain why I think they're effective.

POV can be tricky – it's probably the one thing I see beginner authors stumbling over the most. My aim is to keep the guidance as straightforward as possible, not because I think you should only do it this way or that way, but because most people (myself included) handle complexity best when they start with the foundations and build up and out.

WHY SHOULD YOU BOTHER NAILING POV?

Pro editors and experienced writers agree on one thing: it's worth the beginner author's time to understand POV so that they can make decisions about which to use, where, and why. Consider the following:

- **A better read:** The right POV in the right place enriches the reader's experience; the opposite will mean your book is not as immersive as it might have been. It might even confuse or frustrate your reader. I'm assuming you want your book to be the best it can be, so understanding how narrative POV works, and how to use viewpoint with intent, will help you in that endeavour.
- **A better price:** If you're working with a professional editor, whether a story-level editor (developmental, structural editing) or a sentence-level editor (line editing, copyediting, proofreading), there'll be less to fix if your POV doesn't jar.
- **A better fix:** Some beginner authors, for reasons of budget, choose not to work with a developmental editor. This is the shaping stage in which decisions about how POV will be handled are made. If you go straight to working with a line editor or copyeditor, and they encounter major POV problems, it's likely that their editing will have to be more invasive than either you or the editor would have liked. Plus, the fix might not be as elegant as it would have been if any problems had been attended to before the sentence-level work began.

NARRATIVE POINT OF VIEW IN ACTION



I've used the following books to explore POV in crime writing:

- *Dead Lions* by Mick Herron: Herron offers a masterclass in omniscient POV early on.
- *I See You* by Clare Mackintosh: Interesting mystery-building through use of a first-person transgressor narrative.
- *The Fix* by David Baldacci: Nice examples of blending third-person limited and objective.
- *The Word is Murder* by Anthony Horowitz: First-person viewpoint throughout, made more interesting because the author is a character in his own book!
- *Time to Win* by Harry Brett: Great example of tight, third-person-limited POV, with several viewpoint characters controlled via chapters.

1. THIRD PERSON

This viewpoint comes broadly in two forms – limited and objective. I've placed it first on the list because:

- It's the one that most writers find easiest to master at the beginning of their journey.
- Readers are used to encountering it in contemporary fiction.
- The limited version provides intimacy – we get to explore a character's emotions and hear their voice; the objective version offers a more neutral flexibility when we need some distance to look around and beyond.

(A) THIRD-PERSON LIMITED

This is a deeper POV. We get to sit in a character's skin – experience what they see, hear, feel and think. That provides an immersive experience for readers. It's as if we're them.

Point of view in action

For almost a minute that was that. Shirley could feel her watch ticking; could feel through the desk's surface the computer struggling to return to life. Two pairs of feet tracked downstairs. Harper and Guy. She wondered where they were off to. (*Dead Lions*, p. 17)

His mum pushed past him, bringing a cloud of thick night air seasoned with salt and something he couldn't place. A perfume perhaps, but not his mother's normal scent. (*Time to Win*, p. 321)

The voice is distinctive. The narrative will convey the viewpoint character's way of speaking and thinking. For example, if character X is swears, that can be reflected in the narrative rather than just in their contribution to dialogue.

However, it's called third-person *limited* for a reason. Strictly speaking, what that character can't see or know shouldn't be reported. In the above examples, we're left with questions – of destination and the origin of a smell.

Third-person limited is effective in crime writing because the author doesn't want to give everything away at once. The limitations over what can be known, and therefore divulged, allow the writer to control the unveiling of information via the viewpoint character.

Recommendation

I recommend you stick to one narrative POV per chapter or section to avoid confusion or interruption.

Sometimes an author slips into a different point of view for the space of a single paragraph, or even a sentence. This is especially jarring when the remaining novel is given from the point of view of a single character, whom we have come to regard as our second self. It gives the feeling of a fleeting and unexplained moment of telepathy, an uncomfortable intrusion of somebody else's thoughts. When the protagonist's point of view resumes, we move forward into the narrative warily, ready at any moment for a fresh assault on our minds. (Mittelmark and Newman, p. 159)

That's worth heeding. It means the reader's trust has been lost, that they've been pulled out of the story rather than drawn further into it.

Trickier still is narrative ping pong, where within one section we bounce back and forth between the POVs of Character X and Character Y. Here's a made-up example that demonstrates how things can go wrong.

Point of view in action

Jan ran down the road, her lungs screaming for air. She snatched a glance over her shoulder, hoping to Christ that Melody was behind.

'You okay, Jan?' said Melody. She'd barely got the words out – her throat was on fire. All she wanted to do was stop, breathe, devour that bottle of water in her backpack bouncing hard against her spine.

'We're here,' said Jan. Thank God. Tears of relief stung her eyes. She'd been worried that Mel wouldn't be able to keep up. Guilt niggled. Would she have gone back for her? She wasn't sure.

The problem with this kind of setup is that it 'alienates the reader from both perspectives. She is unable to identify with either because there's no telling when it will be yanked away' (Mittelmark and Newman, p. 161).

In other words, the reader has been prevented from immersing themselves in the story. Stick to one POV per chapter or section and you'll make your writing life easier.

(B) THIRD-PERSON OBJECTIVE

This is a useful viewpoint for the author who wants to convey descriptive information – height, weight, facial expression, environment. Developmental editor Sophie Playle asks us to imagine ‘a floating camera following the characters around.’

Here’s an example from David Baldacci.

Point of view in action

Amos Decker trudged along alone. He was six-five and built like the football player he had once been. He'd been on a diet for several months now and had dropped a chunk of weight, but he could stand to lose quite a bit more. He was dressed in khaki pants stained at the cuff and a long, rumpled Ohio State Buckeyes pullover that concealed both his belly and the Glock 41 Gen4 pistol riding in a belt holster on his waistband. (*The Fix*, p. 3)

The objectivity allows the writer to explore detail what would be unnatural for a character to deliver in their own voice. The narrative voice is neutral.

We’re not accessing thoughts, opinions and emotions with an objective POV, just the stuff that any onlooker could see, hear or smell.

In crime fiction, that can be useful because the reader will be forced to reach their own conclusions as to the reasons for or motivations behind a particular event or behaviour. In other words, it’s mysterious.

However, it can be distancing if overused. We don’t get under a character’s skin. It’s harder to understand what motivates them unless they express it through dialogue. Dialogue is great as long as it’s not dull. Real-life conversations are sometimes littered with mundanity but we don’t want that cluttering a novel. Furthermore, real conversations don’t usually express emotion in the way that prose does.

Recommendation

Use third-person objective POV to create suspense, to make your reader wonder, and ask their own questions, and to provide scene-setting information, but blend with a limited viewpoint for deeper emotional engagement.

In the first paragraph of the example below, Baldacci uses third-person objective to give us background facts. In the second, he switches to limited to explain the character's feelings.

Point of view in action

His size fourteen shoes hit the pavement with noisy splats. His hair was, to put it kindly, dishevelled. Decker worked at the FBI on a joint task force. He was on his way to a meeting at the Hoover Building.

He was not looking forward to it. He sensed that a change was coming, and Decker did not like change. He'd experienced enough of it in the last two years to last him a lifetime. He had just settled into a new routine with the FBI and he wanted to keep it that way. (*The Fix*, p. 3)

2. FIRST PERSON

First-person narrative POVs are the most intimate, the most immediate, and the least flexible. The reader is privy to an individual character's thoughts, emotions and experiences, all told through a distinctive voice. We can only see, hear, smell and feel what the character sees, hears, smells and feels, and are compelled to move through the story knowing only what they know, and at their pace.

However, used throughout an entire novel, from on character only, it can be draining for the reader. There's no way of taking a breather, particularly when only one POV is offered.

This POV is particularly effective in crime fiction when an author wants to offer a distinct transgressor narrative that explores the predator's twisted psyche intimately, and in a way that enables the reader to understand their motivations – what's making them think and behave so monstrously.

Here's an example from *I See You* (p. 176).

Point of view in action

Now that you know what I do, you're intrigued, aren't you? You're wondering what information I've collected about you; what's listed on my ever-growing website. You're wondering if you'll be stopped, like this girl, by an attractive stranger. You're wondering if he'll ask you out for dinner. [...]

Life's a lottery.

He might have something entirely different in mind for you.

Mackintosh punctuates her third-person narrative (a police officer's) with this first-person viewpoint of an anonymous predator, though she keeps the narratives distinct by giving them their own chapters.

The chapters given over to the transgressor provide a rich sense of cat and mouse when juxtaposed with the more distanced police-procedural storyline. Note how the predator-narrator in the above example bends their perceptions into a warped reality – there are no maybes here; they've decided that this is the way things are and justify their actions accordingly.

And because Mackintosh is using the present tense for her first-person narrative, she's able to retain tight control over the unveiling. We're right in the now of the novel. It's deeply suspenseful, but emotionally demanding to read. For that reason, these chapters are usually shorter.

In *The Word is Murder*, author Anthony Horowitz is one of the characters! The viewpoint is first person (his), but most of the novel is set in the following two tenses: the past (I did, I saw) and the past perfect (I had been approached, I had first read). We're not confined to now. That's important because it means the story doesn't drag.

The author himself is almost like Playle's floating camera. We see the protagonist – the detective (Hawthorne) who solves the crime – through Horowitz's eyes as he accompanies him in interviews with suspects and on visits to crime scenes.

The author offers his own theories, even pursues his own lines of investigation, and interjects with stories about his life and career. This adds interest but, ultimately, it's the detective who grounds the crime story; it's through him that we access the procedural elements and the answer to whodunnit.

Point of view in action

They'd used blue and white tape to create a cordon which began at the front door and blocked off the stairs. I wasn't sure how they would deal with the neighbours on the upper and lower floors. As for me, although I hadn't been questioned, a woman in a plastic suit had asked me to remove my shoes and taken them away. That puzzled me. 'What do they need them for?' I asked Hawthorne.

'Latent footprints,' he replied. 'They need to eliminate you from the enquiry.'
(The Word is Murder, p. 208)

Recommendation

First-person narratives introduce depth and explain motivations, but they can be difficult to sustain when they're emotionally challenging, as is the case with transgressor and victim viewpoints. Your reader might be given space to breathe if you introduce an alternative, perhaps a detective's or journalist's.

Playle points out that the opposite problem can occur when the character isn't 'interesting enough to maintain a continuous presence.' Too much *I* can be restrictive if it doesn't allow for the telling of other interpretations. That's why Horowitz's approach works so well, because he's often narrating live from the scene with a detective.

One last thought: if you're basing your whole novel in the first person, be cautious about using the present tense throughout. The past might give you more flexibility, particularly if you're writing action-heavy scenes where, in reality, the character wouldn't have time to give much thought to the consequences and motivations of their behaviour.

3. OMNISCIENT

I've given the biggest page space to this because it's probably the trickiest to master.

Omniscient means *all-knowing*. It's the most flexible of narrative viewpoints because it gives the reader potential access to every character's external and internal experiences. It's also the least intimate.

Imagine a futuristic news helicopter. Inside, our roving reporter shifts her camera from one person to another, and one setting to another. She's also got some serious kit, stuff that enables her to tap everyone's phones, TVs and computers. But that's not all; the characters' brains are bugged too; our reporter knows what they're thinking. She can see, hear and smell it all!

With omniscient narration, the narrator knows everything and isn't limited to the viewpoint of any single character. An omniscient narration could be written in present or past tense, and use first or third person; they could be a character in the story (like a god or an enlightened person), or they could be an observing nonentity. Completely omniscient viewpoints are difficult to pull off well and have fallen out of fashion. (Sophie Playle)

Mick Herron is the author of the Jackson Lamb thrillers, a series about MI5 officers who've screwed up and been sent to Slough House to shuffle paper.

Herron offers a masterclass in effective omniscient POV. He doesn't use a helicopter or a god though; he uses a cat.

He imagines our feline friend sneaking 'like a rumour' (p. 9) into Slough House and checking out the various rooms' occupants.

Of course, a cat doesn't think or behave with intention like a human. The cat can't possibly know any of the things that we're told during its wanderings. Instead, Herron uses it as a cheeky tool to introduce the cast, the environs, and the atmosphere of Slough House ...

INTRODUCTIONS

Dead Lions is book 2 of the series. Herron wants to introduce us to a cast of characters, most of whom appeared in book 1. However, he respects the fact that not all his readers will have read the first book, and that those who have might have forgotten who these people are and why they're important.

The omniscient POV allows him to do the introductions quickly and cleanly, and democratically. None of the characters are explored in depth. Rather Herron gives us a snapshot of what he wants us to know about them, what makes them tick.

Point of view in action

Louisa would have gone onto her knees, gathered the cat in her arms and held it to her quite impressive breasts – and here we're wandering into Min's area of opinion: [...] breasts that are just right; while Min himself, if he could get his mind off Louisa's tits long enough, would have taken a rough manly grasp of the cat's scruff; **(p.11)**

And while our cat would have crossed this threshold as unobtrusively as it had all the others, that wouldn't have been unobtrusive enough. River Cartwright, who is young, fair-haired, pale-skinned, with a small mole on his upper lip, would immediately have ceased what he was doing – paperwork or screenwork; something involving thought rather than action, which perhaps accounts for the air of frustration that taints the air in here [...] **(p. 12)**

FREEDOM TO ROAM QUICKLY

Through the imaginary cat, we're given the freedom to roam without intrusion. No single character's feelings or experiences dominate over the others. It's a form of speedy literary democracy.

That roving feline shows us not only key details about each character, but also how they perceive each other. That's difficult to do with first-person and third-person narration without offering lengthy and interruptive explanations of how the information was acquired.

Point of view in action

But when our cat pokes its head round the door, it'll find only Ho. The office is his alone, and Ho prefers this, for he mostly dislikes other people, though the fact that other people dislike him back has never occurred to him. And while Louisa Guy has been known to speculate that Ho occupies a place somewhere on the right of the autism spectrum, Min Harper has habitually responded that he's also way out there on the git index. [...] **(p. 10)**

It's a lucky escape for our cat [...] for on this particular morning the nigh-on unthinkable has happened, and Jackson Lamb is not dozing at his desk, or prowling the kitchen area outside his office, scavenging his underlings' food; nor is he wafting up and down the staircase with the creepily silent tread he adopts at will. He's not banging on his floor, which is River Cartwright's ceiling, for the pleasure of timing how long it takes Cartwright to arrive [...] (p. 13)

TENSION

Finally, take a look at how Herron uses the omniscient to convey a sense of tension that sets up the next scene.

The main man, Jackson Lamb, head of ops, is not in residence. And that's unusual.

Rather than hopping from one internal monologue to another, or cluttering the text with dull dialogue in which the various characters express their confusion about their boss's absence, the omniscient narrator tells us in only 18 words ('Simply put ...') that everyone knows he's absent, and no one knows why.

Point of view in action

[...] and he's not ignoring Catherine Standish while she delivers another pointless report he's forgotten commissioning. Simply put, he's not here. And no one in Slough House has the faintest idea where he is. (p. 13)

The narration throughout this section is distant, devoid of emotion. It's literally a cat's-eye view.

WHAT OMNISCIENT IS NOT

So an omniscient viewpoint can be powerful. However, it needs to be controlled and used with purpose.

If we're accessing one character's thoughts and experiences, and suddenly we jump to another character's viewpoint, it can jar the reader.

Imagine you're listening to your best friend tell you about a difficult experience. Even though it didn't happen to you, her description of the event helps you to

imagine the challenges she faced, the emotions she grappled with. You're thoroughly immersed and emotionally connected.

Then someone else barges up to you both and tells you what it was like for them. Your friend butts back in to wrestle the telling back to her.

Would the interruption annoy and frustrate you? Would you feel like your efforts to invest in your friend's story were being thwarted?

The impact is the same when it occurs in a book (unless you're using dialogue). That viewpoint ping pong is *not* omniscient POV. It's third-person limited gone awry.

Recommendation

I'd recommend caution. The beauty of crime writing lies in the unveiling, in the immersion, and overuse of an omniscient narrator blocks this.

The all-seeing eye can be an effective tool in the purposeful way Herron's used it at the start of *Dead Lions*, but used throughout an entire novel it would destroy the tension, and distance the reader from the characters.

SUMMARY

There's nothing wrong with experimenting with different narrative viewpoints in crime fiction. Switching can add interest and tension, heighten conflict, and help readers build varying levels of intimacy with different characters.

What is important is that authors choose a POV with intention, and recognize the benefits and limitations of their choices.

Let's finish with the wise words of domestic noir novelist, Julia Crouch:

Choose who is doing your telling very carefully, work with their voices, character, secrets and lies, reliability or lack thereof, and the spaces between different points of view. You can weave a wonderfully rich pattern this way. This doesn't mean that you have to write in the first person ('I') – you can get right up close inside a character's head by using third ('she'). A cool, detached, narrator can be helpful, too, but you have to be clear who and what they are, and why they are there.

FURTHER READING

- For an excellent overview of narrative POV – including the difference between the author, narrator and viewpoint character, and the pros and cons of each approach – read 'Slipping into character – understanding the impact of narrative point of view'. Sophie Playle. The Parlour, 2017.
- *Dead Lions*. Mick Herron. First published by Soho Press in 2013. The edition I used was published by John Murray in 2017.
- *How Not to Write a Novel*. Howard Mittelmark and Sandra Newman. Published by Penguin in 2009.
- *I See You*. Clare Mackintosh. Published by Sphere in 2016.
- *The Fix*. David Baldacci. Published by Pan Books in 2017.
- *The Word is Murder*. Anthony Horowitz. Published by Arrow in 2018.
- *Time to Win*. Harry Brett. Published by Corsair in 2017.