

Case Studies: First Person

Objectives

Students will learn about the advantages and limitations of first person point of view.

Required Materials

access to the Internet and a public library

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Case Studies: First Person Point of View

Reading a story in the first person point of view is about as close as you can come (at least in print) to experiencing the events yourself. In fact, telling a story in first person is a lot like filming with a helmet camera. Click on the links below to see some “first person” videos.

[ski base jump](#)

[urban mountain bike race](#)

While these videos give you the feeling of actually participating in the activities, they also show some limitations of the first person point of view. For instance, in the first video it can be hard to tell exactly what is happening. If someone had recorded the jump from a distance, you would get a clearer view of the whole event: the athlete skiing down the slope, flipping in the air, opening the parachute, and drifting down to the ground. Imagine if the Olympics or a football game were recorded entirely on the athletes' helmet cameras. Would you want to watch? The first-person point of view is a specialized tool to be used with care.

When to Use First Person

Use first person when the real story is what’s happening in the narrator’s head and heart.

Some first-person stories take us into the minds of those who have an unusual way of seeing the world. For instance, the narrator of Dostoyevsky’s “Notes from the Underground” is troubled, self-critical person. While most readers can empathize with him, he is an exaggerated version of an ordinary person. The story is less about what happens to him than how he experiences it. Here’s an excerpt.

[I] never could stand saying, “Sorry, father, I won’t do it again,”—not because I’m not capable of saying it; on the contrary, because I’m too capable of saying it. Yes, indeed! I used to get into awful trouble on such occasions though I was not even remotely to be blamed for anything. That was the most horrible part of it. But every time that happened, I used to be touched to the very depth of my soul, I kept on repeating how sorry I was, shedding rivers of tears, and of course deceiving myself, though I was not pretending at all. . . . For after a minute or so I used to realize bitterly that it was all a lie, a horrible lie, a hypocritical lie, I mean, all those repentances, all those emotional outbursts, all those promises to turn over a new leaf.
from “Notes from the Underground” [\[1\]](#)

Other first-person stories take us into the minds of characters with whom we can easily identify. For instance, the narrator of James Joyce’s “Araby” is in a situation familiar to almost everyone: he has a crush on a girl and can’t stop thinking about her. On an impulse, he makes a promise to go to a bazaar, a kind of street fair, and buy her something.

Sample Lesson: Creative Writing: The Art of Storytelling

At last she spoke to me. When she addressed the first words to me I was so confused that I did not know what to answer. She asked me was I going to Araby. I forgot whether I answered yes or no. It would be a splendid bazaar, she said she would love to go.

"And why can't you?" I asked.

While she spoke she turned a silver bracelet round and round her wrist. She could not go, she said, because there would be a retreat that week in her convent [her school]. Her brother and two other boys were fighting for their caps and I was alone at the railings. She held one of the spikes, bowing her head towards me. The light from the lamp opposite our door caught the white curve of her neck, lit up her hair that rested there and, falling, lit up the hand upon the railing. It fell over one side of her dress and caught the white border of a petticoat, just visible as she stood at ease.

"It's well for you," she said.

"If I go," I said. "I will bring you something."

What innumerable follies laid waste my waking and sleeping thoughts after that evening! I wished to annihilate the tedious intervening days. I chafed against the work of school. At night in my bedroom and by day in the classroom her image came between me and the page I strove to read.

In the end, the narrator gets to the bazaar late and with very little money, and he can't buy anything for the girl. But the important thing is what the narrator thinks and feels about his situation.

I lingered before her stall, though I knew my stay was useless, to make my interest in her wares seem the more real. Then I turned away slowly and walked down the middle of the bazaar. I allowed the two pennies to fall against the sixpence in my pocket. I heard a voice call from one end of the gallery that the light was out. The upper part of the hall was now completely dark.

Gazing up into the darkness I saw myself as a creature driven and derided by vanity; and my eyes burned with anguish and anger.
from "Araby" [2]

Use first person when the narrator's voice—his or her personality expressed through language—is an important element of the story.

Click on the link to read the beginning of the first-person novel [Going Bovine](#). Notice how the narrator's personality draws you in!

For some other modern examples of first person, check out one of these stories or novels from the library.

- "I Am Bigfoot," by Ron Carlson, is a very short story from the point of view of a surprisingly civilized Bigfoot.
- *Grendel*, by John Gardner, retells the story of *Beowulf* from the point of view of the monster.
- "Sonny's Blues," by James Baldwin, tells about the different choices made by two brothers.
- *The Catcher in the Rye*, by J.D. Salinger, recounts the adventures of a sensitive teenaged boy who has just been expelled from school.

Bibliography

[1] from "Notes from the Underground" by Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Great Short Works of Fyodor Dostoevsky*, Harper & Row, 1968, p. 275

[2] from "Araby" by James Joyce, *The Norton Anthology of Short Fiction*, Shorter Fifth Edition, W.W. Norton & Company, 1995, p. 473–474, 476

Through the Character's Eyes (homework)

Choose an unusual character you know from a book, comic book, movie, or TV show. Write a first-person paragraph from this character's point of view. Then post it on the class bulletin board.