New writers are often baffled when trying to choose a point of view for their stories and novels. But, actually, the choice is easy. Over ninety percent of all modern speculative fiction is written using the same POV: limited third person. "Third person" ("she did this; he did that") means the story is not told in first person ("I did this"), or the always-irritating second person ("you did this"). That's easy enough. But what does "limited" mean?

It means that although the narration refers to all the characters by third-person pronouns (he, she, it), each self-contained scene follows the viewpoint of one specific character. Consider this example, which is not limited but rather is omniscient third person, in which the unseen narrator knows what all the characters are thinking:

> "Hello, Mrs. Spade. I'm Pierre Tardivel." He was conscious of how out-of-place his Québécois accent must have sounded here -- another reminder that he was intruding. For a moment, Mrs. Spade thought she recognized Pierre.

In the opening of the paragraph, we are inside Pierre's head: "He was conscious of how out-of-place ..." But by the end of the paragraph, we've left Pierre's head and are now inside another character's: "Mrs. Spade thought she recognized Pierre." Here's the same paragraph rewritten as limited third person, solely from Pierre's point of view.

> "Hello, Mrs. Spade. I'm Pierre Tardivel." He was conscious of how out-of-place his Québécois accent must have sounded here -- another reminder that he was intruding. There was a moment while Mrs. Spade looked Pierre up and down during which Pierre thought he saw a flicker of recognition on her face.

See the difference? We stay firmly rooted inside Pierre's head. Pierre is only aware of what Mrs. Spade is thinking because she gives an outward sign ("a flicker of recognition on her face") that he can interpret. Think of your story's reader as a little person who rides inside the head of one of your characters. When inside a given head, the reader can see, hear, touch, smell, and taste everything that particular character is experiencing, and he or she can also read the thoughts of that one character. But it takes effort for the little person to move out of one head and into another. Not only that -- it's disorienting. Consider this:

> Keith smiled at Lianne. She was a gorgeous woman, with a wonderfully curvy figure.

All right: we're settling in for an encounter with a woman from a man's point of view. But if the next paragraph says:

> Lianne smiled at Keith. He was a handsome man, with a body-builder's physique.

Hey, wait a minute! Suddenly we've jumped into another head, and immersed ourselves in a whole 'nuther set of emotions and feelings. Not only have we lost track of

where we are, we've lost track of who we are -- of which character we're supposed to identify with. Although at first glance, omniscient narration might seem an ideal way to involve the reader in every aspect of the story, it actually ends up making the reader feel unconnected to all the characters. The rule is simple: pick one character, and follow the entire scene through his or her eyes only.

Of course, we usually want some idea of what the other characters in the scene are thinking or feeling. That can be accomplished with effective description. To convey puzzlement on the part of someone other than your viewpoint character, write "he scratched his chin" or "she raised an eyebrow" (or, if you really want to hit the reader over the head with it, "she raised an eyebrow quizzically" -- "quizzically" being the viewpoint character's interpretation of the action). To convey anger, write "he balled his hands into fists," or "his cheeks grew flushed," or "he raised his voice." There are very few emotions that aren't betrayed by outward signs. (This harks back to the show-don't-tell rule, which I talked about in my Winter 1995 On Writing column.)

Still, in real life, there are times when you can't tell what someone else is thinking -- usually because that person is making a deliberate effort to keep a poker face. If you've adopted the omniscient point of view, instead of a limited one, you can't portray such things effectively. Here's a limited point of view:

> Carlos looked at Wendy, unsure whether he should go on. Her face was a stony mask. "I'm sorry," he said again. "So very sorry."

That's much more intriguing than the omniscient version:

> Carlos looked at Wendy, unsure whether he should go on. Wendy thought Carlos had suffered enough and was going to forgive him, but for the moment she didn't say anything. "I'm sorry," he said again. "So very sorry."

In the former, we feel Carlos's insecurity, and we have some suspense about how things are going to turn out. In the latter, there is no suspense. (And, of course, omniscient narration is death -- if you'll pardon the expression -- in mystery fiction: the reader must be kept ignorant of what the various suspects are thinking, or else it will be obvious which one is guilty.)

Note that I've suggested keeping in one character's head for each individual scene. However, you can freely switch viewpoint characters when you change scenes (either at the end of a chapter, or with a blank line within a chapter). Many novels have separate plotlines intertwined, with each of them having its own viewpoint character. But what happens when individuals who have been viewpoint characters in disparate plotlines come together in the same scene? Whose POV do you choose then?

In most cases, it'll be whichever one is at the heart of the action of that particular scene. But there are exceptions. One big one is when someone who has been a point-of-view character is about to die. See, the central conceit of modern fiction is that it's

actually a form of journalism: the tale you are reading is an account of something that really happened, and the author's job has simply been to interview one witness per scene to the events being described. Well, if your main character dies in a scene, how did he or she subsequently relate his or her feelings to the ournalist-author? Even if the dying character has been your viewpoint character throughout most of the story, it's best to be inside another person's head as you watch him or her expire.

(One of the great violations of the journalistic-storytelling model comes from the movie *Citizen Kane*, which, ironically, is a film about journalism: the whole movie revolves around trying to discover the meaning of Charles Foster Kane's dying word, "Rosebud." But the film clearly shows Kane dying alone, with no one witnessing him saying it. Unless you're a genius comparable to Orson Welles, don't try to get away with this in your own fiction.)

There are other times when you'll want to choose someone besides your protagonist as the POV character for a scene or two. No person really knows how he or she is perceived; you may find it illuminating to do an occasional scene from a secondary character's point of view, so that the reader can see your hero as others do. Philip K. Dick did this brilliantly in *The Man in the High Castle*. One of the novel's main characters, Ed McCarthy, is trying to interest a merchant, Robert Childan, in buying some jewelry he and his partner have designed. Ed seems clever and in control in the scenes leading up to the sales pitch to the merchant -- but when it comes time for the actual pitch, Dick plants us firmly inside the merchant's head, and we see Ed McCarthy in a new light:

> [McCarthy] wore a slightly-less-than fashionable suit. His voice had a strangled quality. He'll lay everything out, Childan knew. Watching me out of the corner of his eye every second. To see if I'm taking any interest. Any at all.

For each scene, choose your point-of-view character with care. Stick with that one person throughout the scene -- and you'll find that readers are sticking with your story all the way until the end.