

## How to Write Third Person Narrative

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<http://greatstorybook.com/write-third-person-narrative/>

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*How to write third person narrative is a difficult topic to tackle, because there is just so much nuance. So if you've been waiting for this one, I apologize. It's one of those where I wrote, and let it sit, then wrote more, then needed to let it sit again.*

**Whether you write fiction or non-fiction, you need to know about how to write third person narrative.**

**This is all about how to craft a really solid third person narrative in your story - all the details you need to consider for this kind of narrator.**

The types of narrative modes we can use ([first](#), [second](#), third, hybrid and alternating) are vastly multi-layered, so I want to tackle *just* third person right now.

### **Don't Panic.**

Sadly, there is a lot (read: a LOT) of bad information about writing. When you're told that writing a narrative point of view is a simple breakdown of choosing between first, second and third person – that is

just wrong – and I see this everywhere. It is WRONG. The unfortunate thing about all this misinformation is that it makes the craft of writing much more difficult than it needs to be... because people get confused. “If that’s true, then what about this?”

**Third Person Narrative is extremely common, but many experts consider it the most difficult type of narrative to write really well. I’ll explain here exactly why, and what you need to nail down to avoid typical pitfalls with this type of narrative.**

**What You Must Decide:** When you establish any narrator for your story, you will need to pick a narrative mode, a narrative voice and a narrative point of view. These refine and define your story and everything that happens in it. So I want to cover these with you.

- **Narrative Modes:** first person, second person, third person, hybrid and alternating.
- **Narrative Points of View:** the chosen character who narrates.
- **Narrative Voice:** the form of the story’s delivery, such as epistolary, stream of consciousness, character voice, etc.
- **Narrative Techniques:** any trick a writer might use to tell a story (plot, [character](#), [bathos](#), [MacGuffin](#), etc.).

**Let’s get down to what exactly third person narrative is, what we can expect from this, and then from there - get to the nitty gritty.**

### What you’ll get here:

- 3 essential things to know about third person narrative.
- 4 types of third person POVs.
- 1 type of narrative voice you should apply to the third person narrative.

## Third Person Narrative: the 3 essentials

Third person narrative is when we use “he said, she said” and “it” in a story. This is the most common narrative form. What’s important to remember here is that the third person narrator is **the only one** that can be... well, absolutely anything.

**First Person has to be Unreliable, Limited, and Direct.** It cannot be anything else.

**Second Person has to be Reliable, Unlimited,** and then it can either be Direct or Indirect (you simply pick one or the other).

**Third Person is the only one that can be reliable *or* unreliable. It can be limited *or* unlimited. It can be direct *or* indirect.** You just need to pick one of each.

The choice is entirely yours, and it’s for this reason that Third Person Narrative is considered very difficult. Before you start writing, you have to make these three decisions about it – and once you’ve made those decisions, you *have to stick with them*.

- Reliable or Unreliable
- Limited or Unlimited
- Direct or Indirect

While I have explained these in other articles, I've decided to explain them all again, in the context of crafting for the third person narrative. Switching modes like this does indeed change the writer's perspective a bit. So here we go.

### Unreliable or Reliable?

#### Unreliable

This is when anything the narrator says (to us readers) is tainted by the personality and perceptions of the narrator – which must be a fully developed, round character. Consequently, we might not be able to always trust what the narrator believes is happening. Too, this type of narrator might in fact choose to lie to us, for some reason.

**Most significant attribute: this narrator biases, misleads or lies to us - either intentionally or not.**

#### Reliable

The Reliable Narrator cannot lead us astray or give us false information. Doing so wouldn't just confuse the reader; it would completely derail the story. This is a narrative voice that readers should be able to trust, unquestionably.

**Most significant attribute: everything we read from the narrator can be taken at face value.**

### Switching Around Un/Reliable

Do not make the mistake of crafting a narrator that is “supposedly reliable” only to pull a switch on the reader and turn it into an unreliable character. Some authors have done this in the past, and it has never been well received. Why? It isn't fair to the readers.

**If you're going to write an unreliable narrator, be blatantly clear about it. While the *narrator* is allowed to lie to readers, the writer cannot. The writer has to be honest about what they're writing.**

### Limited or Unlimited?

#### Limited

This type of narrator is an actual character with physical limits. So it cannot know everything, cannot be everywhere. It could well happen that the narrator wasn't even present at an important plot point. Maybe they only have a second-hand or third-hand account! Too, they should be naturally limited just in general, having certain tasks they don't do that well, biases, and other character imperfections that affect their narration.

**Most significant attribute: flawed, not always in-the-know.**

### Unlimited

This narrator knows absolutely everything of the story; what the narrator knows has no limits. A greater being of some sort is placing you in their sights of what is happening, and you as the reader are simply along for the ride.

**Most significant attribute: knows absolutely everything.**

### Indirect or Direct?

#### Indirect

Indirect Narration is when we are simply given “the facts” as they are, with great detail, so that it is up to us (readers) to determine the philosophical or moral worth of anyone or thing in the story. Here’s the tricky bit: we tend to think of this narrator as unbiased, but that isn’t really true. Very often the adjectives we use to describe a thing, or the metaphors we craft, suggest very strongly if something is good or bad... even if indirectly.

For example, you might describe a character’s worn-out looking picket fence in such a way that I know (or think I know) what kind of character dwells there.

If the fence looks like broken, failing teeth in a wolf’s maul – the character who lives there is probably someone you don’t want to meet. (Probably – but maybe not.)

If the fence looks like the cookie crumbs left in Santa’s beard, there’s clearly no harm in ringing the doorbell. (Probably – or not???)

Both of these are considered indirect, because the narrator isn’t telling you exactly what to think. As the story unfolds, you as the reader discover if what you imagined should or might come next really does... or not.

**Most significant attribute: highly descriptive but not telling us exactly what to think about anything.**

#### Direct

This is when the narrator says quite simply how (they believe) things are. If a character is an idiot and the narrator tells us this quite frankly and in those words, that is a direct characterization. (In an indirect narrative, that same character will be described in such detail that we conclude that it’s an idiot on our own.)

If the narrator is also Limited, we have to keep reading to determine whether the statement is true or not... which is to say, we have to keep reading to see whether the narrator is Reliable or Unreliable.

**Most significant attribute: strong opinions about what to think and simply states them as fact.**

How far removed you want your narrator to be from what's happening in the story is up to you, and this is largely a matter of which character you'll choose to be the narrator. So let's bang those out right now.

### **Narrative (third person) Characters**

There are four POVs you might choose to narrate in the third person. These types can sometimes overlap (double-duty), but they needn't, so it's important to list them out separately. Here they are:

- side character, peripheral character
- omniscient
- author surrogate
- dead

#### **Side Character**

A side character needn't ever be present at any moment of the story. In fact, when we ourselves retell stories we heard about people we don't know, we speak of them in third person without any difficulty at all. It's natural.

All Urban Myths are told in third person, presumably a story we heard from another person who witnessed the incident first hand, a.k.a. the side character who survived to tell the tale.

#### **Omniscient**

This is the most common type of third person narrator, for obvious reasons. It's unquestionably the easiest form of this more challenging narrative. It's the voice that is all-knowing, all-seeing.

The thing to remember here is that the omniscient narrator can still be unreliable or direct. They're typically reliable and indirect – but not all the time.

#### **Author Surrogate**

The line between an omniscient third person narrator and an author surrogate third person narrator is a very fine one indeed. Ahem.

[Douglas Adams'](#) fantastic novels are an excellent example of the author surrogate third person narrator who is direct and unreliable.

#### **Dead**

We live in the age of zombies, but that isn't what I mean here. Dead narrators cannot be monsters like vampires or zombies. Those are considered side characters – or even protagonists.

Dead Narrators are ones that cannot physically influence anything in the story. So they're typically spirits or ghosts of the dead.

Many ghost stories narrated by a ghost (usually the protagonist or a side character) are in first person, but not always. If the spirit is simply telling the story as if they are no longer who they were – then it's in third person.

This is an exciting way to let the ghost tell their own story in a manner that comes across as ghostly. Their death removes them from the action that lead to their death, and it's equally reflected in their ghostly voice – or more specifically, their *dead point of view*.

## Narrative Voice

In third person narrative, you can use any form you wish, though Character Voice is unquestionably the best. If you throw in other bells and whistles (such as epistolary or stream of consciousness) into the already complicated mix that is third person narrative, it will probably confuse the intent of the story.

If you're not sure what these Voices are, check the tail end of my article on [First Person Narrative](#).

## Bottom is now Up

When it's time to write your story, write a character profile for your narrator. If the narrator is a character in the story, you've already done this! If that's the case, simply add a few notes to that Character Profile about their narrative style.

What are your questions about the craft of writing? Write below, let me know – or, as ever, just send me an email. I love reading those notes about what you all are doing!

**Keep creating, no matter what.**

**This entry is part of the series**

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