Voice and point of view

The choice of the point(s) of view from which the story is told ... fundamentally affects the way readers will respond, emotionally and morally, to the fictional character and their actions.

David Lodge: The Art of Fiction

A narrative is always told by someone. The narrator is not necessarily the same as the author of the book which contains the narrative: the author is a real person; the narrator is simply the ‘voice’ to whom the words of the narrative are attributed; a single novel may contain several narrators ... We might think of the narrator as a point of view embodied in a character, who can, if wished, represent the author; although sometimes the voice of a narrative or its point of view are not clearly expressed as a character.

Montgomery, Durant, Fabb, Furniss, Mills: Ways of Reading – ‘Narrative’

The narrator is a creation of the author used to tell the story. The narrator may also:

- comment and judge
- directly address the reader
- be a participant in the story
- be a detached observer

be ‘transparent’, appearing to speak with the voice of the author.

The two of the main types of narrative voice are:

- 1st person – narratives told by one of the characters using ‘I’
- 3rd person where the storyteller plays no part in the events and refers to the characters as ‘he’, ‘she’, ‘they’ or by name.

Although this distinction is important, it simplifies the wide and subtle range of narrative voices you will come across in the narrative texts you study.

Third person

Third person omniscient narrator

- A narrator who is assumed to know everything connected with the story narrated. Refers to the characters as ‘he’ or ‘she’. Often assumed to be the author.
- In a third person narrative, the action may be seen predominantly from the perspective of a particular character. This character can be described as the focaliser.

Free indirect style

- Third person narration in which a character’s thoughts and feelings seem to be directly expressed, freely taking on the views and often the language of that character. Narratives often slide between conventional third person narration and this style, moving from a more detached voice to one that is more intimately connected to one character or another.

Stream of consciousness

- A narrative style that imitates the qualities of thoughts and feelings, making the reader feel as if they’re inside someone’s head. The grammar and structure suggest the random and fragmentary nature of thought. In the third person it’s an extreme version of free indirect style.

Intrusive narrator

- A narrator who, telling the story in the third person, intervenes in the narrative with a comment in the first person.
First person

First person narrator
- A narrator who speaks as ‘I’, often a character who plays a role in the story, although it may not be his or her own story.

Stream of consciousness
- A narrative style that imitates the qualities of thoughts and feelings, making the reader feel as if they’re inside someone’s head. The grammar and structure suggest the random and fragmentary nature of thought. In the first person it’s an extreme version of interior monologue.

Interior monologue
- First person, as though the narrator is verbalising their thoughts as they occur.

Unreliable narrator
- A (first person) narrator who is perhaps self-deceiving or who cannot be trusted to give a version of events that is to be believed.

Inadequate (or naïve) narrator
- A (first person) narrator who doesn’t seem to understand as much about what’s happening as the reader.

Other narrative voices

Second person address
- A narrative voice that directly addresses the reader as ‘you’. It’s rare for a whole text to do this, as it’s very hard to maintain.

Multiple voices
- More than one narrative voice used in a single text. Can be first or third person or a mixture of the two.

Self-conscious narrator
- Reminds the reader that what they are reading is fiction, dispelling any illusion that the characters are real people.