

## Points of View

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Here is the opening of a story: *I walked out the front door. A black man was biking down the street.* Now here is that opening again: *I walked out the front door. A man was biking down the street.* Years of reading student fiction has taught me that the narrator in the first opening isn't black. And, almost certainly, the writer of the story isn't either.

On Monday afternoon, I sit in a waiting room, a white woman among white women in an upper middle-class suburb of a city I love but leave every night after work. "It's awful," one woman says to another. "Did you see the photos of the CVS?" I know this careful energy from the classroom of the urban university where I teach. Race is in the room. I wait. Here it comes: "They aren't getting on the light rail, at least," the other woman says.

I, you, we, he, she, they. "Point of view is the position of the narrator in relation to the story, as indicated by the narrator's outlook from which the events are depicted and by the attitude toward the characters." Whose head are we in? I ask my students.

In the days after what some call riots and some call unrest and some call protest, I have recognized in myself and my white liberal friends a sticky earnestness. You know what I mean: the way white women in an elevator with black women strike up conversation. We want to say: I'm not like them, and by them we mean people who live in Florida or Texas and vote Republican. On Facebook, we post quotes by Martin Luther King, Jr., and photos of white and black people bagging debris together. We say the rest of the country doesn't understand Baltimore. We go to marches, making sure to get home before dark.

One of the rules we teachers of writing trot out: don't switch points of view in the middle of a story. If your reader has been in the head of a young black man now standing on a corner of North Avenue with a brick in his hand, don't jump into the head of the policeman on the other side of the street behind a riot shield, even if you know he's thinking that kid with the brick looks like his son.

I'm a white woman who lives with her children in a house that's warm in winter and cool in summer. Hawks, not helicopters, circle my neighborhood. I have health insurance. I have enough money. I have a car. I have a job. People don't quicken their pace when I walk behind them on a sidewalk. I don't worry about my children being shot on their way home from school. Still, I'll try:

*I can't see his face behind that shield, but he can see mine.*

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