

**Text Tool –**

**Text analysis tools for reading English texts**

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**80. IDEAS FOR HYPOTHESES**

**on NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE**

The first person narrator's perspective of the events is limited. This can be seen in ...

The first person narrator's perspective of the events is subjective. This can be seen in ...

There is an omniscient 3rd person narrator who can see everything. This can be seen in ...

The omniscient 3rd person narrator may know everything but only shows knowledge of ...

The 3rd person objective narrator sees everything from the outside and does not have access to the thoughts of the characters. The story is told as if through a camera's eye. An example of this is ...

There are several viewpoints in the story, all 3rd person narrators with a limited perspective. The writer has chosen several viewpoints in order to ...

The first person narrator is untrustworthy. This can be seen in ...

The first person narrator is a participant in the story. This has the effect that ...

The writer may have chosen this type of narrator to underline the theme of ...

The writer may have chosen this type of narrator to create an atmosphere of ...

The writer may have chosen this type of narrator to create tension by ...

**81. EXAMPLE**

Omniscient narrators are used in these novels

Charles Dickens: *The Pickwick Papers*

Leo Tolstoy: *Anna Karenina*

Jane Austen: *Pride and Prejudice*

**82. EXAMPLE**

Subjective 3rd person narrator

Initially Parvez had been pleased his son was outgrowing his teenage attitudes.

A subjective third person narrator presents the story in *My Son the Fanatic* seen through the eyes of the father.

**F.2. POINT OF VIEW, NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE**

Photographers make conscious decisions about which angle to choose when taking their pictures. Similarly, a writer carefully decides how a story is told. In good stories we feel that we *see* what is happening rather than just *being told* about the events and setting. The narrator<sup>80</sup> is the lens the author gives us to see the story through.

Does the narrator tell us a lot or a little? What angle are we looking at the events from?

Is an omniscient third person narrator who is able to see everything describing all the events from above like a god in heaven? Or are we introduced to the plot seen from the point of view of a first person narrator with limited perspective and knowledge?

The narrator is very important for the reader's experience. We need to trust and understand the narrator. Some authors complicate the narrative by using more than one narrator to tell the story. Marge Piercy, for instance, in her novel about the Second World War *Gone to Soldiers*, tells the stories of 10 different main characters.

**THIRD PERSON NARRATORS**

The omniscient narrator's<sup>81</sup> stories are told in the third person (he, she, they). The omniscient narrator knows about everything – what happened before and what will happen in the future, about all events happening everywhere, and about everybody's thoughts and feelings. This type of narrator has great authority, which may be why he/she is rarely found in present-day fiction. The grand novels of the 19th century, e.g. by Charles Dickens and Jane Austen, usually have this type of narrator.

A subjective third person narrator<sup>82</sup>, however, tells the story from the perspective of one character. This gives the advantage of a limited view of the events, but with the possibility of knowing about one person's feelings about them. This type of narrator is very often found in novels, both old and new.

The objective third person narrator<sup>83</sup> is only found in modern fiction. The narrator seemingly objectively reports what happens, as if a camera were following the events. But in reality, it is what the author chooses to describe that carries the theme of the text. Ernest Hemingway is renowned for leaving it to the reader to interpret the feelings of his characters and even some elements of the plot. In texts with an objective third person narrator the events need to carry a lot of significance, since there is no way of knowing about the characters' feelings and having their reactions explained.

### FIRST PERSON NARRATOR

A story can also be told explicitly by one of the characters who experiences the events. In this way the reader is made to feel very close to and friendly with the narrator, because they look through the same eyes. The narrator can be the main character<sup>84</sup>, who in this way dominates not only the point of view, but also the plot.

If a minor character is telling the story<sup>85</sup>, there is the advantage of having somebody at the scene telling all the details and stating his/her feelings about them, but still leaving room for a main character. This is the kind of narrator role that Conan Doyle gives Dr Watson when telling the stories of Sherlock Holmes. When a story is told through the eyes of one character, this is reflected on the language and the level of knowledge. Dr Watson is a well-educated man who understands almost as much as Sherlock Holmes, which enables him to tell about all the elements of Holmes' genius.

But in Emma Donoghue's novel *Room* the narrator – who is also one of the two main characters – is a 5-year-old boy who has spent all his life in one room. In this novel the challenge for the writer is to make all her intelligent and adult points<sup>86</sup> through the language and narratives of a small child.

The advantage of a first person narrator is that the reader identifies very closely with the person through whose eyes the plot is

#### 83. EXAMPLE

##### Objective 3rd person narrator

Hemingway's short story *Indian Camp* starts like this:

*At the lake shore there was another rowboat drawn up. The two Indians stood waiting.*

*Nick and his father got in the stern of the boat and the Indians shoved it off and one of them got in to row.*

The narrator does not give us any explanation about where, why, who. We gradually find out about what happens, but the characters' feelings and reactions are not presented to the reader.

#### 84. EXAMPLE

##### First person narrator

Bridget Jones lets the reader know everything:

*'Ugh. First day of New Year has been a day of horror. Cannot quite believe I am once again starting the year in a single bed in my parents' house. It is too humiliating at my age. I wonder if they'll smell it if I have a fag out of the window.'*

Helen Fielding: *Bridget Jones' Diary*

#### 85. EXAMPLE

##### A minor character as narrator

*'But tell me, Watson, what do you make of our visitor's stick?' ...*

*'I think', I said, following as far as I could the methods of my companion, 'that Dr. Mortimer is a successful, elderly medical man, well-esteemed since those who know him gave him this mark of their appreciation.'*

*'Good!' said Holmes. 'Excellent!'*

Conan Doyle: *Hound of the Baskervilles*

#### 86. QUESTION

What adult message is communicated through the eyes and words of the boy in this extract?

*Also everywhere I'm looking at kids, adults mostly don't seem to like them, not even the parents do. They call the kids gorgeous and so cute, they make the kids do the thing all over again so they can take a photo, but they don't want to actually play with them, they'd rather drink coffee talking to other adults. Sometimes there's a small kid crying and the Ma of it doesn't even hear.*

Emma Donoghue: *Room*

### 87. EXAMPLE

#### Unreliable narrator

The main character Holden in JD Salinger's novel *The Catcher in the Rye* is an example of an unreliable narrator. He actually says in the opening of the novel that he is not going to tell us the truth:

*If you really want to hear about it, the first thing you'll probably want to know is where I was born, and what my lousy childhood was like, and how my parents were occupied and all before they had me, and all that David Copperfield kind of crap, but I don't feel like going into it, if you want to know the truth.*

experienced. A challenge for the reader is to decide to which extent that narrator can be trusted. In some stories the writer makes the narrator unreliable, or leaves it to the reader to wonder about the degree of the narrator's reliability<sup>87</sup>.

## QUESTIONS ABOUT NARRATORS/POINT OF VIEW

	First person narrator	Third person narrator
How much does the narrator know?	<p><i>A first person narrator's knowledge is usually limited.</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. What events/emotions does the narrator focus on?</li><li>2. What events/emotions do we not hear everything about? What does this focus tell us about the narrator?</li><li>3. Does the narrator only have a limited understanding – and if so – in which way? Are the limitations due to lack of insight, understanding, intelligence, maturity or access to information?</li><li>4. How are the narrator's limitations shown? in the language? In the way setting/events are described?</li></ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>7. Is the narrator omniscient (sees, knows and understands everything)?</li><li>8. An omniscient narrator usually doesn't show all his/her potential knowledge. Which characters are described? Why has the choice been made to show only some characters' feelings?</li><li>9. Is the narrator's knowledge limited – and if so, in which way? Is the limited knowledge due to lack of insight, understanding, intelligence, maturity or access to information? How are the narrator's limitations shown?</li><li>10. How much and how clearly does the narrator explain about what happens? Is an objective narrator – like a camera – recording events without explaining them?</li><li>11. Or is a subjective narrator very close to the characters describing their feelings?</li></ol>
Does the narrator let the readers get very close?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>5. How much do we know about the narrator's feelings?</li><li>6. Reliability? Is the narrator telling the truth? Is the narrator deliberately not telling the truth? Is the narrator only telling parts of the truth? Why?</li></ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>12. Do we hear about the narrator's feelings? In many stories a subjective narrator doesn't tell the story but presents the plot from the perspective of one of the characters. In this way the reader is able to understand and become involved in one person's reactions and feelings.</li></ol>

### E.3. CHARACTERS

Characters<sup>88</sup> are the persons in fiction. We know about their personalities and moral from what they look like, what they say and from what they do.

Often the true nature of characters<sup>89</sup> is shown in their relationships with others or in their actions, rather than in what they say or what they look like.

Writers usually leave it to the reader to draw conclusions about the characters, based on how they behave and what they say, rather than make explicit conclusions.

The characters' language can reveal their social or ethnic background, or their age. Their moral attitudes and dilemmas may be revealed by contradictions between what they say and what they do.

One of the great challenges for a reader of fiction is to find out what the main characters are really like, and how they change during the texts.

Main characters, also called protagonists, or maybe heroes/heroines, are in focus because they are on the 'stage' and are important for the plot. But they are also important because they are interesting, complex and develop through the text. They are often challenged by danger or emotional dilemmas; they live through crises and usually end up wiser at the end. Mostly the reader feels sympathy for the protagonists<sup>90</sup>.

#### 88. IDEAS FOR HYPOTHESES

##### ABOUT CHARACTERS

1. The main character's development is shown symbolically in ...
2. The character's social background is reflected in his/her language
3. The main character's dilemma is illustrated in the scene when ...
4. The main character is not doing what he/she intended to do when ...
5. The main character's relationship with ... underlines the theme about ...
6. That the main character is the heroine of the story can be seen in the scene when ...
7. The message of the text is underlined when the main character does ...
8. The main character's personality is described as a contrast to ..., a minor character who is very unlike him/her.
9. The main character develops from ... to ... This can be illustrated in these two scenes ...
10. There are round characters like ... as well as flat characters like ... in the story.

#### 89. EXAMPLE

##### True nature of a character

At the beginning of the story *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* the Grandmother's fancy hat is described in detail. At the end, when she gives up her hat, it is a sign that she is changing drastically:

*The grandmother reached up to adjust her hat brim as if she were going to the woods with him but it came off in her hand. She stood staring at it and after a second she let it fall to the ground.*

Flannery O'Connor:  
*A Good Man Is Hard to Find*

#### 90. EXAMPLE

A protagonist the reader sympathizes with  
The reader understands Lizzy's emotional stress:

*... she felt depressed beyond anything she had ever known before.*

*She entered the house with the wish of appearing cheerful as usual, and the resolution of repressing such reflections as must make her unfit for conversation.*

Jane Austen: *Pride and Prejudice*

#### 91. EXAMPLE

A static, flat character

The mother in Jane Austen's novel *Pride and Prejudice*, Mrs. Bennet is an example of a static flat character.

At the beginning she is described as 'a woman of mean understanding, little information and uncertain temper' – and she stays that way.

All through the novel she is primarily concerned with whether her daughters will succeed in getting married and with what they will be wearing.

Minor characters<sup>91</sup> usually do not change at all through the text. Their function is to be a backdrop and motivation for the main characters' actions and dilemmas. When the minor characters do not change we see the change in the main characters the more clearly.

In some types of text the hero does not develop very much. In thrillers and detective stories this can be the case. Sherlock Holmes stays the same – what interests us about him is his clever ways of finding out who committed the murders.

Sherlock Holmes (or other detectives in crime fiction) could be called *flat*. They are based on the single idea of the super intelligent detective and don't change very much.

But most main characters are *round* – they are complex and change during the course of a text. Their feelings and interests can surprise us – there are contradictions and nuances in their personalities, values and hopes – and their real selves may be hidden to both themselves and the reader until the end of the text.

#### 92. IDEAS FOR HYPOTHESES

##### ABOUT TIME

1. Information ... about the main character's past is presented in the beginning of the story when ...
2. The flashback about ... takes us back to the main character's past to explain why ...
3. The tenses of the verbs indicate that a passage is taking place in the past before (or after) ...
4. The reference to the political (or cultural) event ... dates the plot to the year ...
5. How much time has passed from one part of the text to another is shown by the characters' age or looks/by seasons passing/by reference to political events.
6. The perspective in the text is primarily focused on the past/present/future.

#### F.4. TIME

Time<sup>92</sup> plays a role in various ways in texts. You can ask questions like:

- What effect does the passing time have on the characters and conflicts in the story? Do characters learn from experience? Are conflicts resolved?
- How do events of the past affect what happens in the story?
- How does the reader know about how much time passes during the story?
- How does the reader understand that he/she is now taken back to another point in time?
- What importance do political and historical events play for the text?

### How are the past and the future used in the text?

In many texts, elements of the past are presented in the exposition<sup>93</sup> at the beginning of the text to introduce the characters' previous lives. But often some secret elements of their past will not be revealed until later in the story.

Although the actual plot of a short story takes place during a short period of time, there are often references to events before and after, because the characters introduce them and reflect on them<sup>94</sup>.

Usually a text is focused on the past or the present, but in some texts the future<sup>95</sup> plays an important role.

#### 93. EXAMPLE

##### Time in the exposition of a short story

The first lines of Claire Keegan's short story *Antarctica*:

*Every time the happily married woman went away she wondered how it would feel to sleep with another man. That weekend she was determined to find out.*

A few lines later her situation a few hours before is described:

*She had left a dish of macaroni cheese out for the kids, brought her husband's suits back from the cleaners. She'd told him she was going shopping for Christmas. He'd no reason not to trust her.*

Note the change in the verbs' tense: the past tense in the first section shows that it takes place closer to the present time than the second section.

#### 94. EXAMPLE

##### Characters referring to the past

The Misfit in Flannery O'Connor's *A Good Man is Hard to Find* gives us insight into his childhood in this remark:

*'My Daddy said I was a different breed of dog from my brothers and sisters. 'You know,' Daddy said, 'it's some that can live their whole life out without asking about it and it's others has to know why it is, and this boy is one of the latter. He's going to be into everything!'*

#### 95. EXAMPLE

##### Character looking into the future

The plot of Kate Chopin's *The Story of an Hour*, which was published in 1894, only deals with a short period, i.e. an hour as the title says. But the main character Mrs. Mallard is looking forward in her thoughts:

*'There was something coming for her and she was waiting for it, fearfully. What was it? She did not know; it was too subtle and elusive to name. But she felt it, creeping out of the sky, reaching towards her through the sounds, the scents, the color that filled the air.'*

She is envisioning a new future:

*'There would be no powerful will bending hers in that blind persistence with which men and women believe they have a right to impose a private will upon a fellow creature.'*

This story has only one reference to the past: *'And yet she had loved him, sometimes. Often she had not.'* This fact points us to the theme of the story—namely that the future holds new roles and a new life for women. The story leaves the past behind, and focuses almost entirely on future possibilities.