

Skill Category 4: Narration



Like the grandfather who relates a magical bedtime story in the movie *The Princess Bride*, the narrator of a story or the speaker relating a poem can be a very powerful element. To do well on the AP exam, identifying how the author creates the narrator's or speaker's point of view, perspective, and tone is an important skill to develop. This section of the study guide will help you build on your ability to analyze the key elements of narration.

4.A Identification and Description of Narrator or Speaker



Identifying who is narrating the story or speaking the poem—whether it is a character or someone else—is the starting point for understanding narration. Don't assume that the speaker or narrator is the author.

Key Concepts

In a story or poem, the narrator's / speaker's point of view refers to whether that individual is a character participating in or recalling events of the text (first-person point of view), or someone completely outside those events (third-person point of view).

Less frequently used is second-person point of view, which uses "you" and "your" to present the events.

- William Faulkner's novel *The Sound and the Fury* has four narrators: a different character within the story narrates each of the novel's first three sections, but an authorial voice outside the story narrates the final section.
- Jay McInerney's novel *Bright Lights, Big City* opens in second-person point of view: "You are not the kind of guy who would be at a place like this in the morning. But here you are, and you cannot say that the terrain is entirely unfamiliar. . . ."

The story's narrator or the poem's speaker creates a connection between the reader and the text.

How the narrator or speaker presents things may reveal the response the author expects in the reader.

- The first section of *The Sound and the Fury* uses first-person point of view in a striking way: Faulkner places the reader within the mind of the novel's first narrator, Benjy Compson, a man with an intellectual disability so severe that he lacks the power of speech. Narrating the story through Benjy's agonized perceptions creates a powerful emotional connection for the reader.
- The opening lines of Robert Penn Warren's novel *All the King's Men* attempts to immediately place the reader in a fast-moving car on a highway by using second-person point of view:

To get there you follow Highway 58, going northeast out of the city, and it is a good highway and new. Or was new, that day we went up it. You look up the highway and it is straight for miles, coming at you, with the black line down the center coming at and at you, black and slick and tarry-shining against the white of the slab, and the heat dazzles up from the white slab so that only the black line is clear, coming at you

The narrator's / speaker's perspective is a viewpoint formed by his or her attitude, opinions, biases, motivations, and experience.

Literary perspective and point of view are not the same thing. Literary perspective refers to the **psychological** viewpoint with which the narrator or speaker approaches the events.

To identify the narrator's / speaker's perspective, look for his or her:

- Inclusion of particular details
- Attitude toward the setting
- Opinions about other characters
- Reactions to events as they happen
- Relationship to past experiences
- Attitude about himself, ideas, and events expressed in dialogue with others
- Reasons for making certain choices

- In *The Sound and the Fury*, the mean-spirited Jason Compson narrates the novel's third section from a bitter perspective formed by his resentment over having to support his family financially. Frequently cursing and using heartless sarcasm, Jason reveals his selfish perspective.
- Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* presents two very different perspectives on the revelation about Jim's freedom: Tom Sawyer, who conceals his knowledge that Jim has been freed by Miss Watson's will, has an adventurous, though self-centered, perspective. Huck's more mature, realistic perspective is far different from Tom's childish perspective: he is glad that Jim's freedom will soon reunite him with his family. Huck reflects thoughtfully, "But I reckoned it was about as well the way it was."

What to Look for

As you read prose excerpts, look for the following details and determine what they reveal about the narrator.

- Details that suggest how the narrator wants the reader to react to the narrative.
- Details that indicate the narrator's involvement with other characters
- Clues to the narrator's character, situation, and thoughts
- The types of words the narrator uses to relate the story

Practice Activity

Directions: The excerpt below is the opening of Herman Melville's 1853 short story "Bartleby the Scrivener." As you read, highlight and annotate details and word choices that indicate who is telling the story and reveal the narrator's perspective (attitude, opinions, biases, motivations, experience).

From "Bartleby the Scrivener"¹

I am a rather elderly man. The nature of my avocations for the last thirty years has brought me into more than ordinary contact with what would seem an interesting and somewhat singular set of men, of whom as yet nothing that I know of has ever been written:—I mean the law-copyists or scriveners. I have known very many of them, professionally and privately, and if I pleased, could relate divers histories, at which good-natured gentlemen might smile, and sentimental souls might weep. But I waive the biographies of all other scriveners for a few passages in the life of Bartleby, who was a scrivener of the strangest I ever saw or heard of. While of other law-copyists I might write the complete life, of Bartleby nothing of that sort can be done. I believe that no materials exist for a full and satisfactory biography of this man. It is an irreparable loss to literature. Bartleby was one of those beings of whom nothing is ascertainable, except from the original sources, and in his case those are very small. What my own astonished eyes saw of Bartleby, *that* is all I know of him, except, indeed, one vague report which will appear in the sequel.

Ere introducing the scrivener, as he first appeared to me, it is fit I make some mention of myself, my employees, my business, my chambers, and general surroundings; because some such description is indispensable to an adequate understanding of the chief character about to be presented.

Imprimis². I am a man who, from his youth upwards, has been filled with a profound conviction that the easiest way of life is the best. Hence, though I belong to a profession proverbially energetic and nervous, even to turbulence, at times, yet nothing of that sort have I ever suffered to invade my peace. I am one of those unambitious lawyers who never addresses a jury, or in any way draws down public applause; but in the cool tranquility of a snug retreat, do a snug business among rich men's bonds and mortgages and title-deeds. All who know me, consider me an eminently *safe* man. The late John Jacob Astor³, a personage little given to poetic enthusiasm, had no hesitation in pronouncing my first grand point to be prudence; my next, method. I do not speak it in vanity, but simply record the fact, that I was not unemployed in my profession by the late John Jacob Astor; a name which, I admit, I love to repeat, for it hath a rounded and orbicular sound to it, and rings like unto bullion. I will freely add, that I was not insensible to the late John Jacob Astor's good opinion.

¹person who writes and copies letters for court and legal documents

²in the first place

³extremely wealthy and influential businessman

Sample Annotations

I am a rather elderly man. The nature of my avocations for the last thirty years has brought me into more than ordinary contact with what would seem an interesting and somewhat singular set of men, of whom as yet nothing that I know of has ever been written:—I mean the law-copyists or scriveners. I have known very many of them, professionally and privately, and if I pleased, could relate divers histories, at which good-natured gentlemen might smile, and sentimental souls might weep. But I waive the biographies of all other scriveners for a few passages in the life of Bartleby, who was a scrivener of the strangest I ever saw or heard of. While of other law-copyists I might write the complete life, of Bartleby nothing of that sort can be done. I believe that no materials exist for a full and satisfactory biography of this man. It is an irreparable loss to literature. Bartleby was one of those beings of whom nothing is ascertainable, except from the original sources, and in his case those are very small. What my own astonished eyes saw of Bartleby, *that* is all I know of him, except, indeed, one vague report which will appear in the sequel.

Ere introducing the scrivener, as he first appeared to me, it is fit I make some mention of myself, my employees, my business, my chambers, and general surroundings; because some such description is indispensable to an adequate understanding of the chief character about to be presented.

Imprimis. I am a man who, from his youth upwards, has been filled with a profound conviction that the easiest way of life is the best. Hence, though I belong to a profession proverbially energetic and nervous, even to turbulence, at times, yet nothing of that sort have I ever suffered to invade my peace. I am one of those unambitious lawyers who never addresses a jury, or in any way draws down public applause; but in the cool tranquility of a snug retreat, do a snug business among rich men's bonds and mortgages and title-deeds. All who know me, consider me an eminently *safe* man. The late John Jacob Astor, a personage little given to poetic enthusiasm, had no hesitation in pronouncing my first grand point to be prudence; my next, method. I do not speak it in vanity, but simply record the fact, that I was not unemployed in my profession by the late John Jacob Astor; a name which, I admit, I love to repeat, for it hath a rounded and orbicular sound to it, and rings like unto bullion. I will freely add, that I was not insensible to the late John Jacob Astor's good opinion.

-point of view = the narrator is an older character in the story

-perspective = narrator sees things from an elderly, experienced position

-perspective = narrator thinks Bartleby is strange

-perspective = narrator is astonished by Bartleby

-perspective = narrator believes the easiest life is best

-perspective = narrator sees himself as "safe"; comfortable making a living with legal documents

-perspective = narrator values how Astor reinforced the narrator's sense of himself as careful and practical

-perspective = narrator values money and likes the sound of Astor's name because it reminds him of money; proud that the wealthy Astor thought well of him