

Narrator and First Person Points of View

ACADEMIC VOCABULARY

narrator: the character or voice from whose point of view events are told

point of view: the method of narrating a short story, novel, or narrative poem

first-person point of view: when the narrator is a character in the story and uses the pronoun “I,” “me,” or “we”

unreliable narrator: a narrator who interprets events in a way that is different from the author’s interpretation of the same events

HERE'S HOW

Step 1: Identify the narrator. Who is telling the story? Does the narrator participate in the action of the story? Or is the narrator an outside observer?

Step 2: Identify the point of view. If the narrator uses first-person pronouns—*I*, *me*, and *my*—the point of view is first person. If the narrator speaks to the reader about the narrator’s thoughts and feelings, then, most often, it is first-person narration.

Step 3: Analyze the point of view. Notice when the narrator’s point of view colors the action, affects the way that you feel as you read, or affects your opinions of other characters.

Step 4: Decide whether the narrator is reliable. A narrator who is aware of the events taking place and records them in an accurate, trustworthy way is probably reliable. A narrator who lies, seems out of touch, or expresses outrageous ideas is probably unreliable.

EXAMPLE: FIRST-PERSON POINT OF VIEW

True!—nervous—very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am; but why will you say that I am mad? The disease had sharpened my senses—not destroyed—not dulled them. Above all was the sense of hearing acute. I heard all things in the heaven and in the earth. I heard many things in hell. How, then, am I mad? Hearken! and observe how healthily—how calmly I can tell you the whole story.

It is impossible to say how first the idea entered *my* brain; but once conceived, it haunted *me* day and night. Object there was none. Passion there was none. I loved the old man. He had never wronged me. He had never given me insult. For his gold I had no desire. I think it was his eye! yes, it was this! He had the eye of a vulture—a pale blue eye with a film over it. Whenever it fell on me, my blood ran cold; and so by degrees—very gradually—I made up my mind to take the life of the old man, and thus rid myself of the eye forever.

—Edgar Allan Poe, “The Tell-Tale Heart”

The narrator uses the pronouns *I*, *me*, and *my* to refer to himself.

The narrator speaks directly to the reader. He tells about his own thoughts and feelings.

The narrator is a character in the story.

The narrator does not seem to observe reality accurately. He suffers from emotional problems and expresses reprehensible views.

The first-person narrator of this story is unreliable.

Narrator and First Person Points of View

Directions: Read each passage. Then write answers to the questions on the lines.

My father's family name being Pirrip, and my Christian name Philip, my infant tongue could make of both names nothing longer or more explicit than Pip. So I called myself Pip, and came to be called Pip.

I give Pirrip as my father's family name on the authority of his tombstone and my sister—Mrs. Joe Gargery, who married the blacksmith. As I never saw my father or my mother, and never saw any likeness of either of them (for their days were long before the days of photographs), my first fancies regarding what they were like were unreasonably derived from their tombstones. The shape of the letters on my father's gave me an odd idea that he was a square, stout, dark man with curly black hair.

—Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*

1. Who is the narrator of this story? _____
2. How do you know the narrator is telling this story from the first-person point of view? List *two* reasons.

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Dr. Strauss says I shud rite down what I think and evrey thing that happins to me from now on. I don't know why but he says its importint so they will see if they will use me. I hope they use me. Miss Kinnian says maybe they can make me smart. I want to be smart. My name is Charlie Gordon. I am 37 years old and 2 weeks ago was my birthday. I have nuthing more to rite now so I will close for today.

—Daniel Keyes, *Flowers for Algernon*

3. Who is the narrator of this story? _____
4. Is the narrator reliable or unreliable? Explain your answer.

Narrator and First Person Points of View

Directions: Read each passage. Then write answers to the questions on the lines.

From up here on the fourteenth floor, my brother Charley looks like an insect scurrying among other insects. A deep feeling of love surges through me. Despite the distance, he seems to feel it, for he turns and scans the upper windows, but failing to find me, continues on his way. I watch him moving quickly—gingerly, it seems to me—down Fifth Avenue and around the corner to his shabby taxicab. In a moment he will be headed uptown.

I turn from the window and flop down on the bed, shoes and all. Perhaps because of what happened this afternoon or maybe just because I see Charley so seldom, my thoughts hover over him like hummingbirds. The cheerful, impersonal tidiness of this room is a world away from Charley's walk-up flat in Harlem and a hundred worlds from the bare, noisy shanty where he and the rest of us spent what there was of childhood. I close my eyes, and side by side I see the Charley of my boyhood and the Charley of this afternoon as clearly as if I were looking at a split TV screen.

—Eugenia Collier, "Sweet Potato Pie"

Literature 10

1. Who is the narrator of this story? _____

2. How do you know the narrator is telling this story from the first-person point of view? List *two* reasons.

3. Do you think this narrator is reliable or unreliable? Explain your answer.

