

# Understanding Narration and Narrative Modes

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*The Marshall Plan Workbook*, Evan Marshall, ch. 18

Narrative situation is an aspect of discourse, which means that it is part of the analysis that examines *how* a narrative is told. It is characteristic of narrative prose that it is always *told* by someone. In other words, it is always mediated in some way through a “voice.”

When you examine narrative voice, you basically want to know *who speaks*, or more precisely, *who tells the story*. The question “who speaks” is asked of the narrative as a whole. This narrator can, of course, report on other characters’ conversation. This does not change the narrative situation; it is still the narrator who speaks.

## Types of Narrators

The first distinction that is made is between a narrator who is *not* a character in the story but in a way hovers above it and knows everything about it is a **heterodiegetic narrator**. A narrator who is also a character in the story is a **homodiegetic narrator**. If the homodiegetic narrator is also the *protagonist* of the narrative, it is an **autodiegetic narrator**.

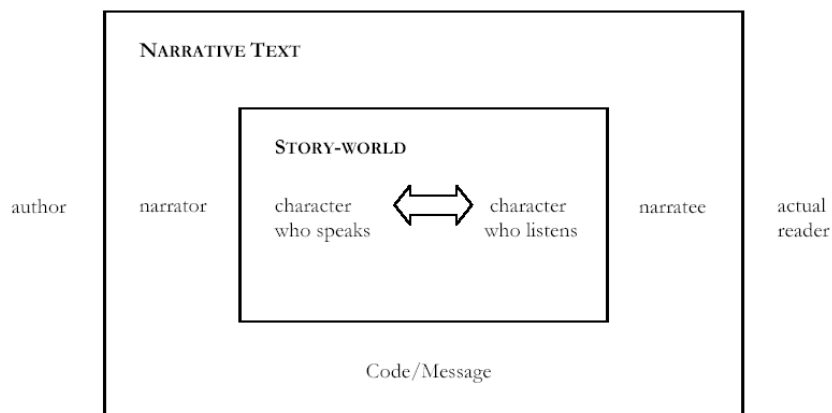
Note that the narrator is *not* the same as the author. Narrators can have opinions that are not the author’s. This is especially obvious in the case of homodiegetic narrators; a male author can create a female narrator without necessarily putting his own gender up for question and one author can create different narrators in different books without having to be suspected of a split personality. The necessary separation between author and narrator also holds for heterodiegetic narrators.

## Narrative Communication

The communication situation in prose texts is comprised of three levels:

- A character addresses another character in the narrative.
- This is narrated by a narrator who sometimes addresses an imaginary “dear reader” (the narratee).
- The text has been composed by a real author and is read by an actual reader.

These three levels are nested, as depicted in the following diagram.



There is a further distinction between overt and covert narrators. An ***overt narrator*** seems to have a distinct personality, someone who makes his or her opinions known (see *narrator comment*). A ***covert narrator***, on the other hand, is hardly noticeable. Covert narrators concentrate on showing rather than telling.

## Focalization

The narrator is the agency that transmits the events (actions) and existents (happenings) of the narrative verbally. The narrator can recount events from a position *outside* the story, adopting the *omniscient point of view* of someone who, for some reason, knows everything about the story. However, the narrator may also adopt the *limited point of view of one character* in the story and consequently remain ignorant of what happens outside this character's range of perception. This choice of perspective is independent of the question whether or not the narrator is a character in the story. To express the distinction between narrative voice (who speaks?) and perspective (who sees or perceives?), we use the term ***focalization***.

An ***external focalizer*** is a focalizer who is external to the story and who is thus also called the *narrator-focalizer* because the focus of perception seems to be that of the narrator. An ***internal focalizer*** is a focus of perception of a character in the story, and thus also called *character-focalizer*. Focalization does not have to stay the same throughout a narrative. A change in focalizer often introduces another point of view into a narrative.

## Unreliable Narrators

Not all narrators are equally reliable. The reader is sometimes led to distrust what a narrator says. There are various reasons for such distrust. Some narrators tell deliberate lies or omit crucial information.

## Narrative Modes

Narrative modes are the kinds of utterance through which a narrative is conveyed. There are two main types: ***showing*** (the direct presentation of speech and action) and ***telling*** (the verbal representation of events).

The chart starting on the next page maps narrative modes from those that show to those that tell.

## Definitions of the Narrative Modes

You must be intimate with the range of narrative modes for fiction. Master each mode and learn how to write well in it. As you write, make sure you're always in one specific mode. Doing this ensures that at all times you know what you're doing and why. The mosaic created by piecing together these passages written in various modes is a tight, well written novel. You should always have a reason for switching modes.

Narrative Mode	Sub-mode	Sub-sub-mode	Definition/Example
<b>Dialogue</b>	direct		<p>Presents the speech of characters directly, in quotation marks.</p> <p>Use this mode to advance your plot, to pit opposing forces against each other.</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">“I’m tired,” she said. “I’m going to bed.”</p>
	indirect		<p>Summarizes the speech of characters. The tense is changed from present to past, from past into past perfect and references to the first person are rendered in the third person.</p> <p>Use this mode when a character explains something to another character when the reader doesn’t need to hear the exact words because it’s long and boring or routine or mundane, the exact words don’t really matter, or because the reader already knows the information.</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">She said she was tired and was going to bed.</p>
<b>Thoughts/feelings</b>	direct	stream of consciousness	<p>Direct presentation of a character’s thoughts in first person, usually without the logic of structure or punctuation, sometimes a jumbled sequence of associations, whether thoughts, feelings, or sensations. Often italicized.</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;"><i>Calm down, get a grip now... oh! this is an interesting sensation, what is it? A sort of... yawning, tingling sensation in my... my... well I suppose I’d better start finding names for things if I want to make any headway [...] so let’s call it my stomach.</i></p>
		interior monologue	<p>Direct presentation of thought as in direct speech. Interior monologue is usually a longer passage of uninterrupted thought. It is intended to present a character’s thoughts directly, imitating as much as possible the way the character might actually have thought his thoughts. Thoughts are more coherent and structured. Sometimes italicized.</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;"><i>What is she be doing up there? She’s always fumbling around in the attic, trying to find some memento from her college days, opening boxes, unwrapping nests of newspaper to find something to transport her into the past. I don’t understand what she sees in those things.</i></p>

Showing >>>>>>

<b>Narrative Mode</b>	<b>Sub-mode</b>	<b>Sub-sub-mode</b>	<b>Definition/Example</b>
<b>Thoughts/feelings</b> <i>(cont'd)</i>	indirect	narrated monologue	<p>This is a mix between psychonarration and interior monologue. The narrator often sets the scene but the character's thoughts are reproduced directly and in a way the character would think, though the narrator continues to talk of the character in the third person. The syntax is less formal (incomplete sentences, exclamations, etc.) and the character's mind style is reproduced more closely. We hear a dual voice; the voices of the narrator and the character are momentarily merged.</p> <p>This can create an impression of immediacy but it can also be used to introduce an element of irony, when the reader realizes that a character is misguided without actually being told so by the narrator.</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">What could she be doing up there, he wondered. Probably trying to find some memento from her college days. He didn't understand what she saw in those things.</p>
		psychonarration	<p>The narrator reports the character's thoughts to the reader, representing them in third person. The narrator remains in the foreground and may add some general observations (comment) not part of the character's thoughts. We hear the narrator's voice more than the character's.</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">He wondered what she could be doing in the attic. She spent a lot of time up there, reminiscing. He failed to understand what she saw in those things.</p>
<b>Action</b>			<p>Used to present real-time action in the story. Events are presented in strict chronological order, using action verbs. Follow the pattern of action–result.</p> <p>You will use this mode most in the writing of your novel. Sometimes action is interspersed with dialogue and narration.</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">Jim climbed out of the car and strode toward the house through the dry, dead grass. He stepped onto the porch and banged on the dilapidated screen door. He waited.</p>

<b>Narrative Mode</b>	<b>Sub-mode</b>	<b>Sub-sub-mode</b>	<b>Definition/Example</b>
<b>Description</b>	character		Represents objects in space (existents of the story), things that can be seen, heard or felt in some way. Character description describes story people.  One of these boxes was occupied [...] by a stern-eyed man of about five-and-forty, who had a bald and glossy forehead, with a good deal of black hair at the sides and back of his head, and large black whiskers. He was buttoned up to the chin in a brown coat; and had a large seal-skin travelling cap, and a great-coat and cloak lying on the seat beside him. (Dickens, <i>Pickwick Papers</i> )
	place		Depicts setting—either broadly, or specifically and up-close.  On one side of this broad curve in the straight seaboard of the Republic of Costaguana, the last spur of the coast range forms an insignificant cape whose name is Punta Mala. From the middle of the gulf the point of the land itself is not visible at all; but the shoulder of a steep hill at the back can be made out faintly like a shadow on the sky. (Conrad, <i>Nostramo</i> ).
	thing	Depicts an object:	A brass plaque fastened to the front gate read: “Financially supported by the Garvanter Historical Society.”
	time	Depicts the season, time of day, or the passage of time.	Five o’clock had hardly struck on the morning of the nineteenth of January [...] (Brontë, <i>Jane Eyre</i> )
<b>Exposition</b>	background	Used to introduce backstory information into the narrative, information the reader needs for the story to make sense. It should be doled out sparingly only when the reader needs to know it. It should be presented to the readers in a way they’re hardly aware they’re getting it:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reduce it as much as possible.</li> <li>• Don’t repeat it (tell the reader once). If you must repeat it, expand on it.</li> <li>• Keep the reader guessing about it.</li> <li>• Chop it up (no big hunks of it).</li> <li>• Convert it to other modes such as action or dialogue.</li> <li>• Create a flashback, but only if necessary (to show the reader exactly how something before the story happened—who did what, who said what, what was thought and felt. Structure it as an action sequence.)</li> <li>• Get it over with (get backstory out of the way by the end of Act 1).</li> </ul>
	summary	Reports events in a condensed narrative form. It is a telling mode that distances the reader and should be used sparingly. Use this mode to:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Report mundane story events (things not important to plot)  She went inside to freshen up and change. Then she skipped back out to the car.</li> <li>• Condense story time (to mark a passage of time quickly in which nothing important to the story happens, or to report events that happen regularly or over a long period of time).</li> </ul>

Narrative Mode	Sub-mode	Sub-sub-mode	Definition/Example
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The last three weeks of school passed in a flurry of activity.

Each morning for the next week she saw him behind the security desk in the lobby, and every time she passed him he nodded once and gave her a big, handsome smile.

- Emphasize emotions instead of events

During the month Kevin was in Cincinnati, Sherry wandered about the apartment, not doing much of anything except eating, sleeping and watching TV. She had never been so lonely in her life.

**Comment**

The mediator (narrator) is most apparent. We find evaluations of the story's events and characters, general observations or judgments.

In the absence of any precise idea as to what railways were, public opinion in Frick was against them; for the human mind in that grassy corner had not the proverbial tendency to admire the unknown, holding rather that it was likely to be against the poor man, and that suspicion was the only wise attitude with regard to it. (Eliot, *Middlemarch*)

Evaluations can also be made less explicitly. The choice of pejorative diction, a hint of irony or the use of modifiers (such as "unfortunately") also work as comment.

Sir Leicester Dedlock is only a baronet, but there is no mightier baronet than he. His family is as old as the hills, and infinitely more respectable. He has a general opinion that the world might get on without hills, but would be done up without Dedlocks. [...] He is a gentleman of strict conscience, disdainful of all littleness and meanness, and ready, on the shortest notice, to die any death you may please to mention rather than give occasion for the least impeachment of his integrity. He is an honourable, obstinate, truthful, high-spirited, intensely prejudiced, perfectly unreasonable man. (Dickens, *Bleak House*)

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Telling

*For more information on when to narrate and when to dramatize, see "How to Employ Narration and Dramatization." For more information on how narrative modes effect the portrayal of story time, see "Story Real Time, Storytelling Time, and Narrative Mode."*

When mixing dialog with a character's feelings, thoughts and gestures, use F-A-D order:

1. Feelings, thoughts
2. Action
3. Dialogue

Feeling	Action	Dialogue
A violent chill passed through him.	His hands began to shake.	"But, but Margo died a year ago..."

You don't always have to provide all three components, but whichever you present, you should be presented in F-A-D order.