

1. What is a narrative? What is a narrator?

Pair up with another student in your class. In two minutes, tell them how you got to school this morning, anything unusual or anything usual that happened along the way and anything you noticed. For example, who did you meet or pass, which way did you go, what was the weather like, what was the traffic like?

There: you have just completed a narrative. A narrative is, quite simply, a story. It is the retelling of something that happened (or is still happening), a chain of events that you become part of by listening to it, watching it or reading it.

A narrator is the 'voice' which tells us that story or that sequence of a chain of events.

2. Telling Stories

As long as human languages have existed, people have been telling stories. In the past and particularly in ancient times and cultures, not everyone could read or write. Our ancestors would gather together as communities, sit around the evening fires and listen to stories being told.

Stories would be told through narrative or even song. Doing so not only provided a form of entertainment, before the world of TV, but also offered possible explanations for how we came to walk the earth and why certain things happen, such as changes in weather.

Oral storytelling allowed for a certain degree of flexibility: a story could be adapted based on the needs, interests or environment the story was being told in. By doing so, this could help to not only share experiences and inspire others, but also ease fears about issues or encourage and explain belief systems.

3. Narrating stories could save your life!

One very talented narrator of stories was the fictional storyteller Scheherazade. Her stories have their roots in the Middle East in the 9th century. Scheherazade was married to a king whose queen had been unfaithful to him. He continued to marry again and execute his new wives after their wedding night so that this could never happen again. Scheherazade tells the king a story on their wedding night, but leaves him in suspense for the ending. The king does not execute her as a result and she continues to weave her magical tales for a thousand and one nights. What keeps you hooked on a story now? How important are 'cliff hangers' as a way of ending chapters or episodes of TV dramas?

Similarly to Scheherazade, other storytellers were 'employed' by people in authority. In medieval England, bards were professional storytellers, employed by a patron (such as a monarch or noble). Minstrels also told stories, often singing or reciting poetry to music for the entertainment of the nobility. They would not only write their own tales, but would also adapt those of others, telling tales of distant places and real or even imaginary events.



KS3 Spine

Narratives and Narrators



4. Written stories: a novel idea

The thing which changed storytelling for good was the invention of the printing press. Although forms of printing were already in existence, Johannes Gutenberg is credited with developing a more durable and efficient system by adapting the technology already available. For example, he mechanised the process by developing systems such as a movable under table, allowing sheets to be quickly changed. He also created the type pieces from a lead-based alloy which is still used even today. By the start of the nineteenth century, a press had been created by Lord Stanhope, which was made from cast iron and had the ability to print 480 pages an hour, doubling the output of the old style press.

Rather than people passing on and narrating stories orally, they could now be written and printed and kept for people to read. At first, collections of stories, fables and folk tales from the past were put together in this way. This paved the way for writers to begin narrating stories afresh and capturing them in print. The word 'novel' that we use today comes from the Italian word 'novella' which means 'something new'.



5. Stream of Consciousness

This type of narration shows the flow of thoughts from a character's mind. It is a more modern type of storytelling developed in the 1900s when people began to be more interested in the way our minds work. It can give the reader a sense that they are 'listening in' on a character's thoughts as they happen. Look at this example from *Catcher In The Rye* by J.D. Salinger published in 1951. Here the narrator, Holden, is working out what he is going to do after being expelled from school:

'What I was really hanging around for, I was trying to feel some kind of goodbye. I mean I've left schools and places I didn't even know I was leaving them. I hate that. I don't care if it's a sad goodbye or a bad goodbye, but when I leave a place I like to know I'm leaving it.'

6. First Person Narrative

If a story has a first person narrator, it means that the story is told by one character at a time. The character could be telling you about events as they happen and could be telling you about events that they are part of. One character could tell the story the whole way through. Or, in some cases, you could have different chapters or events being narrated by different characters in the first person – this could show two or more sides to the story. If a story is told in the first person, it means the narrator will use the first person pronoun 'I' to tell their tale.

8. Third Person Narrative

A third person narrative is a story where the narrator seems to be on the 'outside' looking in at their characters. They would describe events as though they were witnessing them but not involved. People and their actions would be described using third person pronouns. This is a very common form of narrative.

9. Unusual Narrators

As writers have begun to experiment more and more with telling stories, they have developed ever more imaginative ways of narrating stories. *The Book Thief*, published in 2005, tells the story from the point of view of death. *Pax*, published in 2016, tells part of the story from the point of view of a fox that the boy in the story adopts.

10. Unreliable Narrators

An unreliable narrator is one who cannot be completely trusted to be accurate. A narrator could be said to be unreliable because of their age, maturity or mental state. Edgar Allan Poe often used unreliable narrators in his writing. For example, in *The Tell-Tale Heart*, the narrator's confession reveals the irrational mental state he is in. Using an unreliable narrator can be an interesting way to force the reader to reconsider their view and experience of a story or situation. It could be argued that any first person narrator is unreliable, to a certain extent. The narration from one voice will be clouded by their views, experiences, biases and everything else that makes them the narrator/character they are, just like if we recounted an event that had taken place – my retelling may be slightly different from yours. Nevertheless, some are more unreliable than others, for example Poe's narrators or Salinger's Holden Caulfield in *The Catcher in the Rye*.

7. Second Person Narrative

This is an unusual form of narrating where 'you' are placed at the centre of the action. You become a character and are directly involved in the narrative. Some children's adventure books, such as *Goosebumps*, use this format and allow you as the reader to make choices about where the adventure will go. After a couple of pages of reading, you are faced with a choice of where to go or what to do and you have to turn to the relevant page to see what happens next. In some ways, this format mirrors that of a video game. However, this style of narrative is nothing new and was being used in the 1800s by writers like Leo Tolstoy.



KS3 Spine Narratives and Narrators



Activities:

1. What is a narrator?
2. Why did our ancestors engage in storytelling? What purposes could storytelling achieve?
3. What is interesting about the fictional narrator Scheherazade?
4. What were the names of storytellers in the medieval period?
5. Who invented the printing press and when did a major improvement take place?
6. Use the back of the mat to revise the three types of narrative voice and write a sentence explaining each one.
7. What is a stream of consciousness?

KEY VOCABULARY

Activity: Write definitions, in your own words for the following terms:

- Narrative
- Narrator
- Novel
- First person narrator
- Second person narrator
- Third person narrator
- Stream of Consciousness



Activity: Match these extracts with the correct narrative style.

'I never liked long walks, especially on chilly afternoons: dreadful to me was the coming home in the raw twilight, with nipped fingers and toes, and a heart saddened by the chidings of Bessie, the nurse,' **Jane Eyre 1847**

'Scrooge closed the window, and examined the door by which the Ghost had entered. It was double-locked, as he had locked it with his own hands, and the bolts were undisturbed. He tried to say "Humbug!" but stopped at the first syllable.' **A Christmas Carol 1843**

'Around you is the sea, sparkling now in the morning sun; in front of you an old seaman in camelhair coat ... You listen to those oars, with their even beat, to the sounds of the voices carried across the water towards you ...' **The Sevastopol Sketches 1855**

*'What I was really hanging around for, I was trying to feel some kind of goodbye. I mean I've left schools and places I didn't even know I was leaving them. I hate that. I don't care if it's a sad goodbye or a bad goodbye, but when I leave a place I like to **know** I'm leaving it.'* **The Catcher In The Rye 1951**