



Reliable vs. *Unreliable* Narrator.

Whose story is it, really? Today we'll learn to spot the truth-tellers – and the ones in disguise.

Week 2 - Narrative Voice & Perspective | 45-Minute Lesson | Grades 6–8 | Creative Writing



Activate critical thinking about perception, language, and *truth*.

*"My little brother **totally** ruined my science project **on purpose** because he's **jealous**."*

-- Savvy, age 11, telling the story

In your notebook — 3 minutes writing:

1. Can we trust this narrator *completely*?

2. What pieces of information are *missing*?

3. How might the little brother tell *this same* story?

Same event. *Different voices.*

The older sibling says...

*"He **totally** wrecked it. He did it **on purpose**. I just **know** it."*

The little brother might say...

*"She left it **in the way**. I only wanted to **look**. I didn't know it would break."*

Now share

How does the story *change* when the **teller** changes? What stays *true* either way?

Whose story is *it, really?*

A narrator is a lens. Sometimes the lens is clean — sometimes it's *smudged*.

Two voices. Same facts.

*Not always the **same** truth.*

Reliable.

A teller we generally trust.

They are **honest**, **observant**, and **objective** about what happens. They tell us the truth in roughly the way a careful witness would – straight, clear, and without an angle to sell.



Honest

won't twist facts



Observant

notices what's there



Objective

no angle to sell



Most stories lean on this voice –
third-person observers,
dependable narrators, detectives
with a clear view.

Unreliable.

A teller whose credibility is *compromised*. Four flavors worth knowing – each one leans a different way.

01

Lying

Knows the truth and chooses to swap it for something more flattering.

02

Biased

Sees everything through their side of the story. Can't help it – won't notice.

03

Naive

Young, sheltered, or simply missing the adult subtext – takes things at face value.

04

Unstable

Memory, perception, or mood is shifting under them. They narrate what's real to them – and only that.

Same hallway. Two voices.

Trust them differently.

A Reliable Voice

A detached bystander. Honest. Observant. Reliable.

"The bell rang at 8:15. I walked into homeroom, hung up my jacket, and sat down at my desk."

What's there: a clock, a doorway, a jacket. No spin. No subtext.

An Unreliable Voice

An unreliable narrator with a heavy pride problem.

*"I **totally** aced that test. Honestly, no big deal. Easy A."*

What's actually there: a backpack stuffed with crumpled papers, a quiz marked 47, an empty pencil case.

The Magic Rule.

*Unreliable narrators aren't just **liars** — they have a usually **motive** that hides the truth from **themselves** first, the reader second.*

The motives you'll meet

Pride

cannot look small

Fear

of getting caught

Innocence

doesn't know any better

Self-Delusion

believes their own story

“

*"I **didn't even want** the basketball anyway. It's a **stupid game** for loud people. When Coach didn't put me in during the final quarter, it was actually doing me a **massive favor** so I could focus on my **profound mental daydreams**."*

Listen for the *protest*.

*A narrator's defensiveness is a confession in disguise – **the louder they deny, the more they betray.***

Stated out loud

What they're actually saying

"I didn't even want the basketball."

I really, really wanted to play.

"It's a stupid game for loud people."

It's a game I care about too much.

"It was doing me a massive favor."

It hurt. Badly.

"Profound mental daydreams."

Watching the bench from the corner of my eye.

*Today's rule of thumb: **when you catch a narrator over-explaining**, trust the opposite of what they're claiming.*

The Unreliable *Confession*.

15 MIN

Write one short scene from the perspective of an unreliable narrator with a hidden motive. Pick one of the three:

A *Totally* Not Scared

You're writing a character who insists they are *absolutely fine* about...

- *a dark basement*
- *a growling dog*
- *a roller coaster*

B The *Rescue Mission*

You "borrowed" something without asking. In your version, it was the *noble* thing to do.

Hint: choose an object they'd never own. A keepsake from someone's room. The class hamster. The last cookie.



C Home *Defense*

You are a pet. The chewed shoe was an *emergency* act of home defense — obviously.

Choose your pet: a dog, a cat, a hamster, or add a parrot that won't stop telling on you.



A craft tip for the room

Drop the clues *small*.

Tiny word choices let the reader know the truth — even when your narrator refuses to admit it.

"I **totally** wasn't scared."

a doubled-up "totally + wasn't"

"It was **just** a tiny mistake. **Honestly**."

"honestly" rarely means honestly

"I **happened** to be near the cookie jar."

"happened to" never happens to

*The reader should feel smart for noticing what the narrator won't say — that's where the **drama** lives.*

TEACHER TIP

Leveling Up.

For writers who've already nailed the basics of first and third person.

A move worth trying

Make them *convincing* to themselves.

Stronger writers should resist the cartoonish version of unreliability – the wild-eyed villain who screams *"I'm not mad!"* A reliable-feeling lie builds **dramatic irony**: the reader sees what the teller can't.

- The narrator should sound *plausible*. Calm. Reasonable. Almost affectionate to themselves.
- The reader's small *ah-ha* is the reward – don't rob them of it.

Homework • Take it home

The *Two-Sided* Coin.

Take today's in-class character — or invent one — and write the *same event* twice. Two journal entries. Two voices. Watch for who's telling the story. Listen for what's missing. Notice when a sentence lands a little too carefully.

Every narrator is a choice. Make it a deliberate one.

A

Version A

Mostly reliable, *objective* observer.

100–150 WORDS

Honest onlooker. Wide-angle camera. The camera doesn't lie, but it might leave things out.

B

Version B

Unreliable narrator with a *heavy bias*.

100–150 WORDS

The same event, but through eyes that lie — to us, or to themselves first. Let a motive peek through.

Due • next class period • bring printed, written neatly, or share a doc link to Martocello@schoolnova.org

Beyond the basics

Why *bother* with mentor *texts*?

*For writers who've already locked down first and third person – mentor texts show them how published authors **manipulate truth** for keeps. Pick the one that fits your class.*

Three flavors coming up

Classic Short Story

acrobatic & clever

Middle Grade / YA

relatable & contemporary

Picture Book

for all levels, even 8th graders

Classic Short Story — *acrobatic & clever*

01

"The Tell-Tale Heart"

by Edgar Allan Poe

The narrator frantically *insists* on his own sanity — every detail he shares unequivocally *proves the opposite*.

02

"The Open Window"

by Saki (H. H. Munro)

A clever teenager *invents* a macabre tragedy on the spot to mess with an unsuspecting visitor. Lie for the sheer sport of it.

Over-compensation. When a narrator protests too much ("I am not mad! Why will you say that?"), it's a red flag the size of a house.

Middle Grade / YA — *relatable & contemporary*

01

"The Perks of Being a Wallflower"

by Stephen Chbosky

Epistolary. Naive. Charlie is intensely *honest* — and unreliable because of what he doesn't yet have language for. Quiet. Cracks the heart open.

02

"The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time"

by Mark Haddon

Christopher reads the world through math, logic, and absence — immense social contexts simply don't register. *Pristine* — and limited.

Craft Focus

Dramatic irony. The gap between what the narrator understands and what the reader *already* understands.

Short-Form Visual — *for all levels*

Don't dismiss picture books

"I Want My Hat Back"

by Jon Klassen

The text says

A bear calmly asks animal after animal if they've seen his missing hat. Everyone he asks politely says no.

What the page shows

*A rabbit — wearing the bear's hat — sitting right there in plain sight. The bear **knows**. He just won't admit it.*

Text vs. subtext contradiction. The text says one thing — but the subtext (or the narrator's internal delusion) tells a wildly different story.