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Narration (NAR) — Skills 4.A–4.D

A complete study guide to the Narration big idea (narrators, speakers, point of view, perspective, and reliability) in AP English Literature and Composition. Narration is the single largest category on the multiple-choice section, so this guide rewards careful study. Work through the concepts and the four worked readings, then complete the practice set. Keys are at the end.

Why Narration Matters on This Exam

Narration questions account for 21–26% of the multiple-choice section, roughly 12–14 of the 55 questions, the largest share of any big idea. This is also where “tone” lives: nearly every “the speaker’s attitude is best described as...” question is a Narration question. On the free-response side, three of the last several years of Q2 prompts have turned directly on a narrator: the 2018 prose prompt on the narrator’s attitude toward Zenobia, the 2021 prompt on a narrator’s response to a riverbank incident, and the 2026 prompt on a narrator’s complex experience eating a cake. The Chief Reader Reports for 2024 and 2025 both note that students overlook irony, humor, and the narrator’s stance.

The Enduring Understanding

NAR-1 (official, paraphrased): A narrator’s or speaker’s perspective controls the details and emphases that affect how readers experience and interpret a text.

In plain English: Every story or poem comes through someone’s eyes (or through no one’s, which is also a choice). That someone decides what you see, what you do not see, what gets emphasized, and what attitude to take toward it. When you analyze narration, you are asking two questions at once: “What does the narrator tell me?” and “What does the way the narrator tells it reveal about the narrator, and about how I am meant to judge what I am told?”

The Four Skills, Translated

SKILL	OFFICIAL WORDING (PARAPHRASED)	PLAIN ENGLISH	UNITS EMPHASIZED
4.A	Identify and describe the narrator or speaker of a text.	Who is talking, to whom, from what position, in what situation?	1, 4

SKILL	OFFICIAL WORDING (PARAPHRASED)	PLAIN ENGLISH	UNITS EMPHASIZED
4.B	Identify and explain the function of point of view in a narrative.	Name the point of view and explain what it allows or prevents the reader from knowing.	1, 4
4.C	Identify and describe details, diction, or syntax in a text that reveal a narrator's or speaker's perspective.	Find the exact words and sentence patterns that reveal the narrator's attitude.	4, 6, 9
4.D	Explain how a narrator's reliability affects a narrative.	Decide whether the narrator can be trusted, and say what follows if not.	6, 7

Key Concepts and Definitions

Narrator, Speaker, Author

TERM	DEFINITION
Author	The real person who wrote the text.
Narrator	The voice that tells a story (prose fiction).
Speaker (or persona)	The voice in a poem.
Implied author	The sensibility the reader infers behind the whole text, which may differ from a narrator's views.

Rule: **never assume the speaker is the poet.** Call the voice “the speaker.” Treating a poem’s “I” as the author’s autobiography is a common error and often gives wrong answers.

Point of View

POINT OF VIEW	DESCRIPTION	WHAT IT ALLOWS	WHAT IT HIDES
First person	A character narrates (“I”)	Intimacy, voice, self-revelation	Everything the narrator cannot know or will not admit
Second person	Addresses “you”	Immediacy, implication of reader	Distance
Third-person limited	Outside narrator tied to one character’s mind	Close access to one consciousness	Other characters’ thoughts
Third-person omniscient	Outside narrator who knows all minds	Range, irony, authority	Mystery (the narrator may know too much)

POINT OF VIEW	DESCRIPTION	WHAT IT ALLOWS	WHAT IT HIDES
Objective / dramatic	Reports only what can be seen and heard	Ambiguity, restraint	Inner life

Narrative Distance

Narrative distance is how close the narration stays to a character's thoughts and feelings. A narrator can move from far (a panoramic summary) to near (a thought rendered directly) within one paragraph. Questions that ask about "distance" are asking you to notice where the narration enters, or stays out of, a mind.

Free Indirect Discourse

Free indirect discourse blends a narrator's voice with a character's thoughts without quotation marks or "she thought." It is the signature technique of Austen, Flaubert, and Woolf, and a source of irony because the narrator's perspective and the character's can diverge inside one sentence.

Stream of Consciousness and Interior Monologue

Stream of consciousness presents a character's unfiltered flow of thoughts and sensations, often with fragmented syntax and associative leaps. **Interior monologue** presents a character's inner speech more directly. The syntax is the evidence: look for run-ons, fragments, and missing punctuation.

Tone, Attitude, and Diction

TERM	DEFINITION
Tone	The narrator's or speaker's attitude toward the subject (and sometimes toward the audience).
Mood	The emotional atmosphere the reader feels.
Diction	Word choice; consider connotation, register (formal/colloquial), and specificity.
Syntax	Sentence structure: length, order, punctuation, repetition.
Irony	A gap between what is said and what is meant (verbal), what is expected and what happens (situational), or what a character knows and what the audience knows (dramatic).

Reliability

A narrator is **unreliable** when the reader has reason to distrust the account: because the narrator is naive, biased, deceptive, mentally disturbed, or limited in knowledge. Unreliability is not the same as lying. A well-meaning child who misunderstands what she sees is unreliable too. Evidence of unreliability includes contradictions, excessive protest, gaps between the narrator's claims and the events described, and other characters' reactions.

Tone-Word Bank for Narration

Use precise words. Avoid "negative" or "positive."

FAMILY	WORDS
Admiring / warm	admiring, affectionate, reverent, tender, nostalgic, wistful, appreciative
Critical / harsh	sardonic, scornful, contemptuous, caustic, disdainful, indignant, resentful, bitter
Sorrowful	elegiac, mournful, melancholy, resigned, despairing, pensive
Neutral / analytical	detached, objective, clinical, matter-of-fact, restrained, measured, ambivalent
Humorous	wry, bemused, playful, whimsical, mock-serious, facetious, droll, satiric
Intense	urgent, fervent, vehement, defiant, ominous, apprehensive, anxious

Pair tone words when the passage mixes feelings: “wry affection,” “resigned bitterness,” “detached curiosity.” Paired tone choices appear constantly in MCQ answer sets, and the correct option is the pair in which *both* words hold.

Worked Close Reading 1: A First-Person Speaker and Reliability (Skills 4.A, 4.C, 4.D)

Edgar Allan Poe, “The Tell-Tale Heart” (1843, public domain), opens:

True!—nervous—very nervous and 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.

Step 1 — Identify the narrator (4.A). A first-person narrator addressing an unspecified listener (“you”), speaking after the events he will relate, in defensive self-justification.

Step 2 — Gather the evidence (4.C). - *Syntax*: the opening is a staccato of dashes and fragments: “True!—nervous—very nervous and dreadfully nervous.” The punctuation enacts agitation. - *Diction*: “nervous” is intensified twice (“very,” “dreadfully”). “Sharpened,” “acute,” “hearken” are language of heightened perception. He also says “healthily” and “calmly,” words that protest too much. - *Rhetorical questions*: “why will you say that I am mad?” and “How, then, am I mad?” The narrator argues with an accuser who has not spoken. - *Claims*: “I heard all things in the heaven and in the earth. I heard many things in hell.” The claim is both a boast and a sign of delusion.

Step 3 — Judge reliability (4.D). The narrator insists on his calm while his punctuation shakes. He repeats his sanity rather than demonstrating it. The word “mad” appears in the speaker’s mouth before anyone has called him that. That gap between his claim (“calmly”) and his delivery (breathless fragments) is the signature of unreliability.

Step 4 — State the function. Poe uses the unreliable first-person narrator to implicate the reader. We hear the murderer's reasonable-sounding account and recognize the madness through its form. The story's horror comes from the gap between the narrator's confidence and our judgment.

A model commentary sentence: The narrator's insistence that he can tell the story "calmly" arrives in a sentence broken by dashes and exclamations, so that his syntax contradicts his claim and the reader, deprived of any outside corrective voice, must learn to hear the madness beneath the argument for sanity.

Worked Close Reading 2: Speaker and Dramatic Monologue (Skills 4.A, 4.C)

Robert Browning, "My Last Duchess" (1842, public domain), opens:

That's my last Duchess painted on the wall, Looking as if she were alive. I call That piece a wonder, now:
Frà Pandolf's hand Worked busily a day, and there she stands. Will't please you sit and look at her?

Step 1 — Identify the speaker and situation (4.A). The speaker is a duke, speaking to a listener (an envoy, as we learn later) in a gallery, showing a portrait of his previous wife. The poem is a **dramatic monologue**: a single speaker addresses a silent listener and unintentionally reveals his own character.

Step 2 — Gather the evidence (4.C). - *Possessive*: "my last Duchess" treats a wife as one of a series of possessions, and "last" implies others will follow. - *Verb*: "That piece a wonder" makes the wife an object, a "piece" of art, to be admired as craftsmanship. - *Dismissal of agency*: "Frà Pandolf's hand / Worked busily a day." He credits the painter's labor, not the sitter's being. - *Phrase*: "Looking as if she were alive" is the first hint of the poem's horror: the picture is a replacement for life. - *Invitation*: "Will't please you sit and look at her?" The duke controls the encounter; he stages the viewing.

Step 3 — Perspective. The duke believes he is showing refinement and power. The poem's structure (one voice, no reply) means that the reader must judge him, not the poem. The perspective controls the emphasis: the Duchess's smile, her blush, her kindness to others all appear as offenses in his telling, and the reader sees them as innocence.

Step 4 — State the function. The monologue form makes the speaker convict himself. Because there is no narrator to correct him, the gap between what the duke thinks he reveals (taste, authority) and what he does reveal (jealous cruelty) is the poem's drama.

A model commentary sentence: By having the duke introduce his late wife as "that piece" that "stands" on the wall, Browning lets the speaker's own possessive grammar condemn him, so that the reader hears an admission of control where the duke believes he is offering a compliment to art.

Worked Close Reading 3: Narrator Attitude and Free Indirect Discourse (Skills 4.B, 4.C)

Jane Austen, *Emma* (1815, public domain), opening sentence:

Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition, seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence; and had lived nearly twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress or vex her.

Step 1 — Identify the point of view (4.B). Third-person, with a narrator who is in the voice of a worldly commentator and also close to Emma's own sense of herself.

Step 2 — Gather the evidence (4.C). - The three adjectives "handsome, clever, and rich" are positive, in a list that is also a catalog of advantages. - The verb "**seemed**" is the key. The narrator does not say Emma *did* unite the best blessings; she "seemed to." The word introduces doubt without declaring it. - "very little to distress or vex her": the understatement hints that the absence of difficulty may be a deficiency. The reader senses that someone who has "very little to vex" her has not been tested. - The sentence continues, in the next lines of the novel, with the phrase "the real evils of Emma's situation were the power of having rather too much her own way, and a disposition to think a little too well of herself." The narrator's later explicit judgment confirms what "seemed" signaled.

Step 3 — The function of the point of view. Austen's narration mixes two attitudes: the language of Emma's flattering self-image and a narrator's gentle irony about it. This is the root of free indirect discourse: the narrator speaks in a way that is partly Emma's own perspective, so that the reader both shares her complacent view and sees through it.

Step 4 — State the function. The narrator's tone is **affectionate irony**. The opening catalogs Emma's advantages in the very terms Emma would use, then quietly marks them as an insulated condition. The point of view lets the reader enjoy her charm while preparing for her education.

A model commentary sentence: Austen's single verb "seemed" turns a catalog of blessings into a question, so that the narrator's affectionate irony enters the novel in its first sentence and the reader begins by admiring Emma while already suspecting that her contentment is the result of never having been contradicted.

Worked Close Reading 4: Reliability and Distance in an Original Passage

The following passage is **original**, written for this guide.

I want to say first that I am not a person who exaggerates. My sister will tell you otherwise, but she has never been present when anything important happened. On the night in question, I was in the parlor with the lamp lit and the door closed, which is how I always read, and I heard nothing unusual until the clock struck ten. Then I heard the front gate. It is a gate that sticks, and I have told my brother-in-law many times to see to it, and so when it opened without the usual complaint, I knew at once that whoever had come in had come in knowing the trick of it. I will not say who I thought it was. I will say only that I got up, and turned the lamp low, and waited, and that I was perfectly calm.

Step 1 — Identify the narrator (4.A). First person, a woman reporting a past event with a legalistic precision ("the night in question"), directed at an unnamed audience she is trying to persuade.

Step 2 — Gather evidence (4.C). - Opening: "I am not a person who exaggerates" is an unprompted denial. - Dismissal: "My sister will tell you otherwise, but she has never been present when anything important happened." The narrator preempts a contradicting witness and discounts her in advance. - Over-precision: "the clock struck ten," "a gate that sticks." - Inference: "I knew at once that whoever had come in had come in knowing the trick of it." She builds a conclusion from the absence of a sound. - Withholding: "I will not say who I thought it was." - Closing: "I was perfectly calm." The same protest as Poe's narrator.

Step 3 — Judge reliability (4.D). There is no definitive evidence of lying, but several signs of **bias and self-interest**: she preempts contradiction, she builds a theory out of an absence, and she insists on her calm. The reader cannot confirm anything she says about the night; we have only her account, and the account is arranged to make her correct.

Step 4 — State the function (4.B). First person is essential: only from inside her voice can we hear the defensiveness. A third-person narrator could simply tell us what happened. Here the reliability problem *is* the story.

Distance. The narration stays extremely close to her own reasoning, so we are denied the corrective perspective of the sister, the brother-in-law, or the intruder. The effect is claustrophobic: we are inside a mind that has decided what it will find.

How Narration Shows Up on the Multiple-Choice Section

Narration questions have the broadest range of stems:

- "The speaker of the poem is best described as..."
- "The point of view of the passage is best described as..."
- "The narrator's tone in the second paragraph can best be described as..."
- "Which of the following best describes the speaker's perspective on X?"
- "The narrator's reliability is called into question by..."
- "The use of the first-person plural ('we') in line 3 primarily..."
- "The phrase 'X' (line 18) reveals that the narrator..."
- "The narrator's attitude toward [character] is best described as..."

Common wrong-answer patterns: **tone mismatch** (too extreme, such as "contemptuous" for "skeptical"), **half-right pairs** (one correct adjective plus one wrong), **author-for-speaker confusion**, and **opposite-valence** options. Opposite-pair distractors often hide the key: if two options are antonyms, one of them is frequently correct.

Sample Questions

1. In Poe's opening, the narrator's repeated questions ("why will you say that I am mad?" and "How, then, am I mad?") primarily serve to

- A. show that the narrator is skillfully refuting an accusation
- B. reveal the narrator's defensiveness and need to persuade
- C. invite the reader to agree that the narrator is sane
- D. demonstrate the narrator's genuine curiosity about his condition

Key: B. The questions answer accusations nobody has voiced, revealing anxiety. (A) takes the narrator's self-assessment at face value. (C) is partially true as a goal but not as the questions' effect. (D) is unsupported.

2. The duke's reference to his late wife as "that piece" (Browning) most strongly suggests that he

- A. admires the painter's skill above all else
- B. regards his wife as an object to be displayed and controlled
- C. is grieving for the loss of a beloved companion
- D. feels that the painting is an inadequate likeness

Key: B. "Piece" objectifies; it fits the possessive "my" and the staged viewing. (A) is half-right; he does admire the painter, but the phrase is about his wife. (C) is contradicted by the tone. (D) is unsupported.

3. The narrator's use of the verb "seemed" in the first sentence of *Emma* primarily serves to

- A. express the narrator's uncertainty about the facts of Emma's life
- B. introduce gentle irony about Emma's apparent good fortune
- C. criticize Emma's wealth and social standing
- D. indicate that Emma is unaware of her blessings

Key: B. "Seemed" separates appearance from fact without stating the contradiction. (A) misreads irony as ignorance. (C) overreaches. (D) is contradicted by the free-indirect self-regard.

4. In the original parlor passage, the narrator's statement "I was perfectly calm" most strongly suggests that she

- A. is an objective observer of the events
- B. is eager to leave a favorable impression of her state of mind
- C. is hiding the identity of the intruder from the reader
- D. is confident that her sister will corroborate her story

Key: B. Like Poe's narrator's "calmly," the protest signals anxiety about how she will be judged. (A) contradicts the evidence of bias. (C) is a different detail. (D) is contradicted by her dismissal of her sister.

How Narration Shows Up on the Free-Response Section

Question 1 (Poetry)

Q1 requires you to identify the speaker, the occasion, and the audience before you can say anything else. Chief Reader Reports encourage reading the title for "genre, point of view, setting, even prepositions." Treat the speaker as a character with a perspective: ask who is speaking, to whom, and why now.

Question 2 (Prose)

Q2 is the most narration-dependent question. The 2024 report notes that students overlooked "the omniscient narrator" and the passage's irony and humor. The 2025 report adds that students ignored secondary characters whom the narrator uses to develop the protagonist.

A model thesis (for a Q2 prompt on the parlor passage asking about the narrator's complex portrayal of herself):

Although the narrator presents herself as a calm and exact witness, the very precision of her account, her preemptive discounting of her sister, and her refusal to name the person she suspects reveal a mind constructing a case rather than reporting an event, so that the passage becomes less a record of the night than a portrait of someone who needs to have been right.

A model body paragraph:

The narrator's first sentence tells us what to doubt. "I am not a person who exaggerates" answers a charge no one has made, and the denial arrives before any event has been described. She then disarms the one witness who could contradict her: her sister "has never been present when anything important happened." The sentence is built to sound like evidence but works as a preemptive strike, since it defines "important" so that only the narrator's presence can qualify. The clinical phrase "the night in question" makes the account sound like testimony, and the details that follow, the clock striking ten and the gate that "sticks," have the false solidity of a prepared statement. In this register of apparent precision, the reader begins to hear what the narrator cannot: the strain of a mind insisting on its own authority. Her calm is a performance for an audience she is afraid will not believe her.

Question 3 (Literary Argument)

Narration is useful on Q3 whenever a prompt concerns secrets, memory, deception, or perspective (2016 on deception, 2025 on a character's secret). Prepare, for each of your texts, a one-line description of the point of view and one moment where it limits or distorts what the reader knows.

A model Q3 thesis (2016 prompt on a character's motives for deceiving others; text: *The Great Gatsby*):

Fitzgerald filters Gatsby's deceptions through Nick Carraway, a narrator who professes disapproval but is bound to admiration, so that the novel's treatment of Gatsby's invented self is itself double-voiced: we see a man lying in order to make a past real, and a narrator who half believes the lie.

Practice Exercises

Answers are in the Answer Key.

Exercise 1 (Skill 4.A). For each of the four worked passages (Poe, Browning, Austen, parlor), write one phrase identifying the speaker or narrator, the apparent audience, and the situation.

Exercise 2 (Skill 4.B). Choose one of the passages and rewrite its first two sentences in a different point of view (for example, third-person objective). In three sentences, explain what the rewrite loses.

Exercise 3 (Skill 4.C). Quote two diction choices and one syntactic feature from the Poe passage that reveal the narrator's perspective. For each, write one sentence stating what it reveals.

Exercise 4 (Skill 4.C). Choose a tone pair from the Narration tone-word bank that best describes Austen's narrator in the first sentence of *Emma*. Defend it with two quoted words.

Exercise 5 (Skill 4.D). List three pieces of evidence from the parlor passage that the narrator may be unreliable. For each, state whether the unreliability is likely due to bias, self-deception, or deliberate deception, and why.

Exercise 6 (Free indirect discourse). Write two sentences about a character's disappointment: the first in plain third-person narration, the second in free indirect discourse. Explain the difference in one sentence.

Exercise 7 (Dramatic monologue). Choose a character from a play or poem you know who reveals more than they intend. Quote one line and explain in a paragraph what the character reveals.

Exercise 8 (MCQ writing). Write a question about the Poe passage on the function of the dashes in the first sentence. Provide four options. Make one distractor a "tone mismatch," one "author-for-speaker," and one a "names the device only."

Common Misconceptions

"The speaker is the poet." The speaker is a constructed voice. Even in an autobiographical poem, the speaker is the poet's *performance* of a self. Use "the speaker" in every essay.

"Unreliable means lying." Unreliable includes naive, mistaken, biased, limited, and self-deceived narrators. A child who misreads an adult scene is unreliable, and often that is what gives the passage its poignancy.

"First person is always more reliable because it is personal." First-person narrators have the strongest motives to shade the truth. Intimacy is not accuracy.

"Third-person omniscient narrators are neutral." They have attitudes too, expressed through irony, emphasis, and what they choose to reveal. Austen's omniscient narrator is one of the most opinionated voices in English.

"Tone words can be 'positive' or 'negative'." On the exam, vague tone words lose points. "Wistful," "sardonic," and "resigned" differ. Choose precisely and prove it.

"Tone and mood are interchangeable." Tone is the narrator's attitude; mood is the reader's feeling. They may be opposite (a cheerful narrator describing a horror).

"If I can't identify the narrator's gender or name, I can't analyze the narration." You can always analyze perspective: what the narrator emphasizes, omits, and how the syntax moves.

Quick Reference: Narration Questions to Ask Every Text

1. Who is speaking? To whom? When, relative to the events?
2. What does the narrator know, and what can the narrator not know?
3. What is the narrator's attitude toward each subject? Which exact words reveal it?
4. Does the tone change? Where?
5. Does the narrator's account contradict itself or what other characters do?
6. What would a different narrator tell me that this one does not?

Answer Key

Exercise 1 (model). Poe: a first-person narrator addressing an accuser (the reader) after a murder, defending his sanity. Browning: a duke addressing a silent envoy in a gallery, presenting the portrait of his late wife. Austen: a third-person narrator with an ironic, worldly voice describing Emma's situation at the start of the novel. Parlor: a first-person woman addressing an unnamed listener, giving a defensive account of a night she believes proves her point.

Exercise 2 (sample). Rewrite: “A woman sat in a parlor with the lamp lit and the door closed. At ten o’clock the front gate opened.” The rewrite loses the narrator’s interpretive intrusions (“which is how I always read,” “I have told my brother-in-law many times”), her preemption of her sister, and the claim to calm. The objective version gives events, but the story of the passage is the narrator’s need to control how those events are read.

Exercise 3 (sample). Diction: “nervous... dreadfully nervous” reveals acknowledged agitation; “healthily... calmly” reveals the claim he cannot demonstrate. Syntax: the dashes and exclamation in “True!—nervous—very nervous” enact agitation, contradicting the narrator’s claim of calm. Also acceptable: “I heard many things in hell” (boast revealing delusion).

Exercise 4 (sample). “Affectionate irony.” Evidence: “seemed to unite” (the verb signals gap between appearance and fact) and “very little to distress or vex her” (the understatement implies untested comfort). The affection comes from the generous catalog of qualities (“handsome, clever, and rich”); the irony comes from “seemed.”

Exercise 5 (sample). (1) “I am not a person who exaggerates”: unprompted denial; self-deception or bias. (2) Discounting her sister in advance: deliberate shaping of the audience’s view; bias. (3) Inferring identity from the gate’s silence: a theory built on an absence; self-deception. (4) “I was perfectly calm”: the protest signals anxiety; self-deception. Any three well-supported are acceptable.

Exercise 6 (model). Plain: “Marta was disappointed that the letter had not come.” Free indirect: “The letter had not come; of course it had not, and she had been foolish to expect it.” The second slides into Marta’s own voice, including her self-reproach, without quotation marks or “she thought.” The difference is that free indirect discourse lets the reader hear the character’s mind and the narrator’s framing at once.

Exercise 7. Open response. Full credit: a specific character; an accurate quotation; a statement of what the line reveals that the character does not intend; and a link to the character’s perspective or motive. Example: Lady Macbeth’s “A little water clears us of this deed” reveals, through the confident understatement, a self-belief that the sleepwalking scene later shows to be false.

Exercise 8 (model). The dashes in the opening sentence of Poe’s passage (“True!—nervous—very nervous”) primarily suggest that the narrator (A) is carefully constructing a rhetorical argument (*takes his self-presentation at face value*) (B) is agitated despite his claim of composure (*KEY*) (C) uses dashes to separate clauses of equal weight (*names the device only*) (D) shares the author’s own anxiety about his sanity (*author-for-speaker confusion*)

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