

Short Fiction II

AP English Literature and Composition

What Textual Details Reveal About a Character

Unit 4 returns to short fiction with a much larger toolkit. Its two most valuable additions are **narrative distance** and the idea that **choices reveal values**.

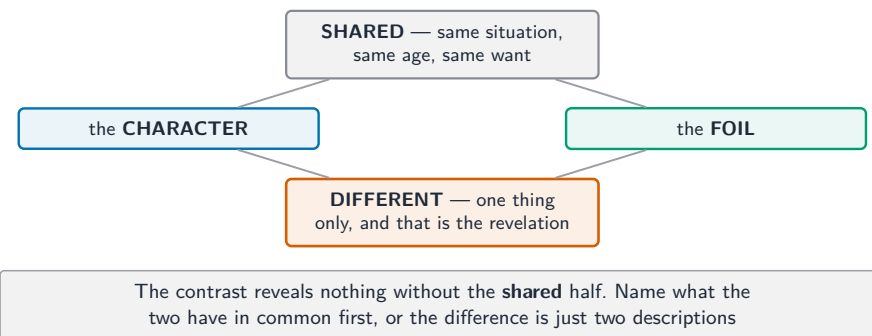
- The significance of characters is often revealed through their **agency** 能动性 and through **nuanced descriptions**.
- **Characters' choices - in speech, action, and inaction - reveal what they value.**

That second statement is the most practical sentence in the whole course for essay-writing. Whenever you need a claim about a character, look at a choice and ask what it must be true for that choice to have made sense to them.

The Function of Contrasting Characters

- The main character is the **protagonist** 主人公; the **antagonist** 对立者 opposes them.
- **Protagonists and antagonists may represent contrasting values.**

The word *may* is doing careful work. An antagonist is not necessarily a villain; the strongest antagonists hold a value the reader can also recognise as good, which is why the conflict is a conflict rather than a rout.



Nuances in Characters' Relationships

Conflict among characters often arises from tensions generated by their different value systems.

This is Unit 3's definition applied to relationships. Two characters in a long-running disagreement usually disagree about something prior to the argument they are having.

The Function of Setting in a Narrative

A setting may help establish the mood and atmosphere of a narrative.

Mood is the reader's feeling; atmosphere is the quality the text creates around events. Both are produced by selection - which details of a place the text mentions, and which it does not.

CONTEXT — it tells you what is normal here, so a departure can register

MIRROR — it carries the feeling the character will not state

CONSTRAINT — it limits what this character is able to do

ANTAGONIST — it is the thing being struggled against

The bottom row does **plot** work. A setting that constrains or opposes is not scenery, and saying so is a claim rather than a description

The Relationship Between Character and Setting

The environment a character inhabits provides information about that character.

This is a second route into character that avoids the trap of psychologising. A room described through its neglect, its order, or its borrowed furniture tells you about the person who lives there, and it is textual evidence rather than speculation.

How Plot Orders Events

Some patterns in dramatic situations are so common that they are considered **archetypes** 原型, and these archetypes carry associations readers bring with them.

Use archetypes carefully: recognising one is a starting point, and the interesting analysis is almost always where a text **departs** from the pattern it invoked.

The Function of Contrasts Within a Text

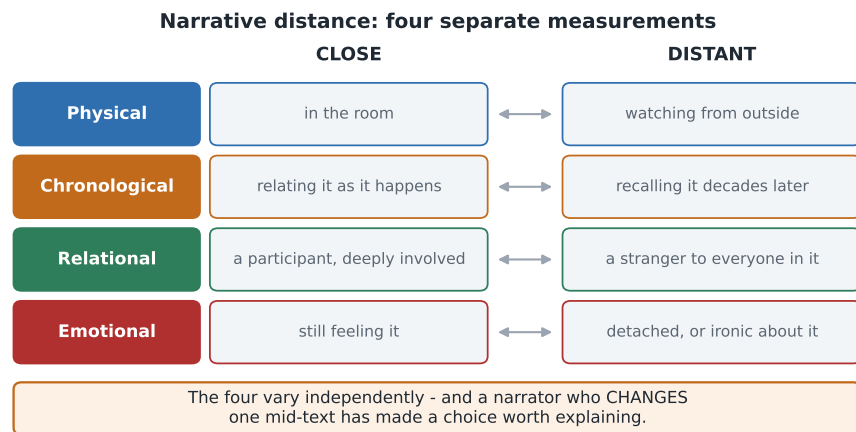
- The differences highlighted by a **contrast emphasise particular traits or characteristics** in the things contrasted.
- **Contrasts often represent conflicts in values** related to character, narrator, or speaker perspectives.

Identifying the Narrator or Speaker

Narrators may function as characters who directly address readers, and who either recall events or relate them as they occur.

That distinction - recalling versus relating as they occur - is the first axis of narrative distance below.

The Function of Point of View



A narrator's position is not one fact but four, and any of them can be the analysis

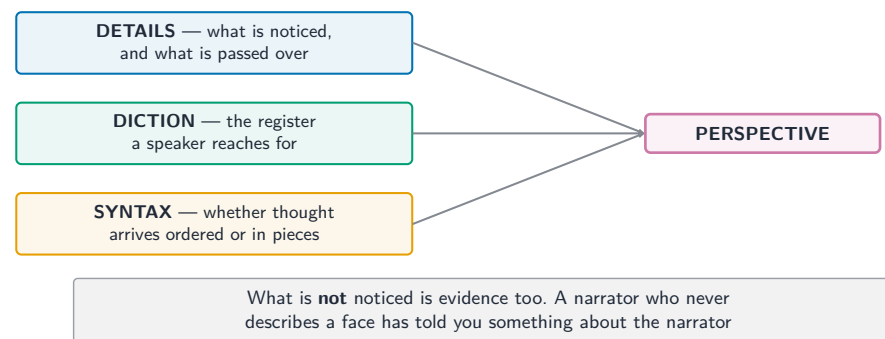
- **Narrative distance** 叙述距离 refers to the **physical distance, chronological distance, relationships, or emotional distance** between the narrator and the events or characters.

- **Stream of consciousness** 意识流 is narration in which a character's thoughts are related through a continuous flow, often with little conventional ordering.

Narrative distance is the most powerful and least-used tool in this course. A narrator recounting their childhood forty years later is chronologically distant, and that distance supplies irony the child could not have had. Reduce the distance - a narrator relating events as they occur - and the irony vanishes, replaced by immediacy and unreliability.

Details, Diction, and Syntax Reveal Perspective

- Narrators' and characters' **backgrounds and perspectives shape the tone** they convey.
- **Descriptive words** not only qualify what they describe but **convey a perspective** toward it.
- **The attitude of a narrator or speaker toward an idea, character, or situation emerges** from these choices.



Developing a Literary Thesis Statement

Unchanged: a thesis **expresses an interpretation** and requires textual defence; it **may** preview the line of reasoning.

Developing Commentary

- A **line of reasoning** is the logical sequence of claims defending the thesis, communicated through **commentary**.
- **Body paragraphs develop the reasoning and justify claims** using evidence.

- Effective paragraphs are **cohesive** and often use **topic sentences** 主题句 to state a claim and explain the reasoning.

Selecting Relevant and Sufficient Evidence

Same four points as Unit 3: evidence used **strategically**; **effective** when commentary explains the relationship; **sufficient** in quantity and quality; and interpretation as a **recursive** process.

Control Over the Elements of Composition

Coherence occurs at different levels - within a sentence, between sentences, across the essay - and writers achieve it when the **arrangement of reasons, evidence, and details** makes the line of reasoning followable.

Worked example (a real AP exam task). A prose fiction prompt asks how the author’s narrative choices convey the narrator’s attitude to a remembered event. A weak answer: “*The narrator is nostalgic and uses descriptive language.*” A scoring answer uses narrative distance: “*The narrator relates a single afternoon from a distance of decades, and the distance is doing the work: he describes his own excitement in the third person - ‘the boy ran’ - before returning to ‘I’ for the disappointment. Choosing where to close the chronological gap lets him withhold sympathy from his younger self while claiming the loss as his own.*” Distance, its variation, and the attitude it produces.

Exam tips

- **Choices reveal values.** Ask what must have been true for the choice to make sense to that character.
- An **antagonist is not a villain.** The strongest hold a value the reader can also recognise as good.
- **The environment tells you about the character** - and it is textual evidence, not speculation.
- Archetypes are a **starting point**. The analysis is where the text departs from the pattern.
- **Narrative distance** has four kinds - physical, chronological, relational, emotional. It is the most underused tool here.
- A narrator who **closes or opens the distance** mid-text has made a choice. Say what it produces.