

1 Review the Skill

Any story is shaped by the narrator, or person who tells it. The narrator's **point of view** determines the perspective readers will have on events. An **omniscient** narrator knows all or most of the information contained in a story. A **first-person** narrator provides only a partial view of events—the way he or she sees or interprets them. Analyzing the point of view of a story will help you identify who is telling a story and how the narrator's method of story-telling affects a tale.

2 Refine the Skill

By refining the skill of determining point of view in fiction, you will improve your study and test-taking abilities, especially as they relate to the GED® Reasoning Through Language Arts Test. Read the passage below. Then answer the questions that follow.

ON THE GALLOWS

A man stood upon a railroad bridge in northern Alabama, looking down into the swift water twenty feet below. The man's hands were tied behind his back, the wrists bound with a cord. A rope closely encircled his neck. It was attached to a stout cross-timber above his head and the slack fell to the level of his knees. Some loose boards laid upon the ties supporting the rails of the railway supplied a footing for him and his executioners—two private soldiers of the Federal army, directed by a sergeant who in civil life may have been a deputy sheriff. At a short remove [distance] upon the same temporary platform was an officer in the uniform of his rank, armed. He was a captain. A sentinel at each end of the bridge stood with his rifle in a position known as "support," that is to say, vertical in front of the left shoulder, the hammer resting on the forearm thrown straight across the chest—a formal and unnatural position, enforcing an erect carriage of the body. It did not appear to be the duty of these two men to know what was occurring at the center of the bridge; they merely blockaded the two ends of the foot planking that traversed it.

From AN OCCURRENCE AT OWL CREEK BRIDGE by Ambrose Bierce, © 1890

a The narrator's language is detached, describing the scene as an observer might. This objectivity is likely to indicate that the story is told by an omniscient narrator.

b A first-person narrator also could describe all the details, but they would be based on the narrator's perceptions of them.

TEST-TAKING TIPS

When a character narrating a story refers to himself or herself as I, the story is told from first-person point of view. A narrator who knows the thoughts of all the characters is omniscient.

- In this passage, the narrator provides information about
 - what characters think.
 - how characters feel.
 - why events are taking place.
 - what the scene looks like.
- If the man about to be executed were describing this scene, he **most** likely would include
 - the sentinels' feelings about executions.
 - his own thoughts and feelings about his situation.
 - the executioners' feelings about their task.
 - the captain's thoughts about the event.

DIRECTIONS: Read the passage, read each question, and choose the **best** answer.

THE GIRLS RECEIVE PRESENTS

1 Jo was the first to wake in the gray dawn of Christmas morning. No stockings hung at the fireplace, and for a moment she felt as much disappointed as she did long ago, when her little sock fell down because it was crammed so full of goodies. Then she remembered her mother's promise and, slipping her hand under her pillow, drew out a little crimson-covered book. She knew it very well, for it was that beautiful old story of the best life ever lived, and Jo felt that it was a true guidebook for any pilgrim going on a long journey. She woke Meg with a "Merry Christmas," and bade her see what was under her pillow. A green-covered book appeared, with the same picture inside, and a few words written by their mother, which made their one present very precious in their eyes. Presently Beth and Amy woke to rummage and find their little books also, one dove-colored, the other blue, and all sat looking at and talking about them, while the east grew rosy with the coming day.

2 In spite of her small vanities, Margaret had a sweet and pious nature, which unconsciously influenced her sisters, especially Jo, who loved her very tenderly, and obeyed her because her advice was so gently given.

3 "Girls," said Meg seriously, looking from the tumbled head beside her to the two little night-capped ones in the room beyond, "Mother wants us to read and love and mind these books, and we must begin at once. We must be faithful about it, but since Father went away and all this war trouble unsettled us, we have neglected many things. You can do as you please, but I shall keep my book on the table here and read a little every morning as soon as I wake, for I know it will do me good and help me through the day."

From *LITTLE WOMEN* by Louisa May Alcott, © 1868

3. The narrator in the passage knows that Jo is disappointed about the lack of presents and that Meg [Margaret] has "a sweet and pious nature" (paragraph 2). The narrator in the story is
- A. Jo.
 - B. Meg.
 - C. omniscient.
 - D. first-person.
4. Meg [Margaret] is described as having "small vanities" (paragraph 2). According to the passage, who has this perspective about Meg?
- A. the narrator
 - B. Jo
 - C. Meg's mother
 - D. Beth
5. By using this point of view, the author **most** likely intended to
- A. provide insight into the reading habits of girls in the 1800s.
 - B. analyze the girls' reactions to their Christmas gifts.
 - C. reveal Jo's despair at the family's lack of money.
 - D. present the thoughts of all the characters.
6. In the last line of the excerpt, Meg says, "... I shall keep my book on the table here and read a little every morning ... for I know it will do me good." How does this statement support the narrator's point of view about Meg?
- A. Meg's statement shows that she has small vanities as the narrator has described.
 - B. Meg's statement shows that Meg is no longer disappointed.
 - C. Meg's statement shows that she is sweet and pious, as the narrator has described.
 - D. Meg's statement shows her feeling that the book is a true guidebook.

★ Spotlighted Item: **FILL-IN-THE-BLANK**

DIRECTIONS: Read the passage. Then fill in your answers in the boxes below.

THE NARRATOR DESCRIBES CONNIE

1 Her name was Connie. She was fifteen and she had a quick nervous giggling habit of craning her neck to glance into mirrors, or checking other people's faces to make sure her own was all right. Her mother, who noticed everything and knew everything and who hadn't much reason any longer to look at her own face, always scolded Connie about it. "Stop gawking at yourself, who are you? You think you're so pretty?" she would say. Connie would raise her eyebrows at those familiar complaints and look right through her mother, into a shadowy vision of herself as she was right at that moment: she knew she was pretty and that was everything.

From *WHERE ARE YOU GOING, WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN?* by Joyce Carol Oates, © 1967

7. This passage is written from a(n) point of view.
8. Whose thoughts and actions does the narrator reveal?

DIRECTIONS: Read the passage, read each question, and choose the **best** answer.

DEXTER WATCHES THE GIRL

1 She had come eagerly out onto the course at nine o'clock with a white linen nurse and five small new golf clubs in a white canvas bag which the nurse was carrying. When Dexter first saw her she was standing by the caddie house, rather ill at ease and trying to conceal the fact by engaging her nurse in an obviously unnatural conversation graced by startling and irrelevant grimaces from herself.

2 "Well, it's certainly a nice day, Hilda," Dexter heard her say. She drew down the corners of her mouth, smiled, and glanced furtively around. ...

3 The smile again—radiant, blatantly artificial—convincing.

4 "I don't know what we're supposed to do now," said the nurse, looking nowhere in particular.

5 "Oh, that's all right. I'll fix it up."

6 Dexter stood perfectly still, his mouth slightly ajar. He knew that if he moved forward a step his stare would be in her line of vision—if he moved backward he would lose his full view of her face. For a moment he had not realized how young she was. Now he remembered having seen her several times the year before—in bloomers.

From *WINTER DREAMS* by F. Scott Fitzgerald, © 1922

9. In the excerpt, the little girl's smile is "radiant, blatantly artificial—convincing" (paragraph 3). This description indicates that the narrator
- A. knows only the thoughts of the nurse.
 - B. knows the girl's thoughts.
 - C. can describe the girl's actions, not her feelings.
 - D. will describe the girl sympathetically.
10. If Dexter were the narrator of this passage, he would
- A. be unable to overhear the girl talking.
 - B. use the pronouns *she* and *he* to describe the scene.
 - C. use the pronoun *I* to describe his feelings.
 - D. be able to hear all of the conversation between the girl and the nurse.

DIRECTIONS: Read the passage, read each question, and choose the **best** answer.

A TUTOR OF REFUGEES

1 Oskar Gassner sits in his cotton-mesh undershirt and summer bath-robe at the window of his stuffy, hot, dark hotel room on West Tenth Street as I cautiously knock. Outside, across the sky, a late-June green twilight fades in darkness. The refugee fumbles for the light and stares at me ...

2 I was in those days a poor student and would brashly attempt to teach anybody anything for a buck an hour, although I have since learned better. Mostly I gave English lessons to recently arrived refugees. The college sent me; I had acquired a little experience. Already a few of my students were trying their broken English, theirs and mine, in the American marketplace. I was then just twenty, on my way into my senior year in college, a skinny, life-hungry kid, eating himself waiting for the next world war to start. It was a ... cheat. Here I was palpitating to get going, and across the ocean Adolf Hitler, in black boots and a square mustache, was tearing up all the flowers. Will I ever forget what went on with Danzig that summer?

3 Times were still hard from the depression but anyway I made a little living from the poor refugees. They were all over uptown Broadway in 1939. I had four I tutored—Karl Otto Alp, the former film star; Wolfgang Novak, once a brilliant economist; Friedrich Wilhelm Wolff, who had taught medieval history at Heidelberg; and, after that night I met him in his disordered cheap hotel room, Oskar Gassner, the Berlin critic and journalist, at one time on the *Acht Uhr Abendblatt*. They were accomplished men. I had my nerve associating with them, but that's what a world crisis does for people, they get educated.

From THE GERMAN REFUGEE by Bernard Malamud, © 1963

11. Who is the narrator of the story?

- A. Oskar Gassner
- B. Friedrich Wilhelm Wolff
- C. a college student
- D. a former film star

12. Oskar Gassner's thoughts and actions are revealed through

- A. the other language students.
- B. Oskar Gassner himself.
- C. the refugee.
- D. the student.

13. On the basis of the point of view of the passage, what information is **most** likely to be included later in the story?

- A. the thoughts of the students learning English
- B. the thoughts and feelings of other German refugees
- C. anything seen or thought by the college student
- D. the feelings but not the thoughts of the story's characters

14. Paragraph 2 includes the statement "I was in those days a poor student and would brashly attempt to teach anybody anything for a buck an hour, although I have since learned better." What does this quotation reveal about the narrator's perspective on the events in the story?

- A. The narrator cannot be trusted because he will do or say anything for money.
- B. The narrator has a high opinion of himself.
- C. The narrator is writing about events in the past and has learned much since that time.
- D. The narrator has a negative opinion of how he behaved when he was younger.

15. Which of the narrator's qualities does the point of view emphasize?

- A. youth
- B. experience
- C. cynicism
- D. despair

A MAN AWAITS EXECUTION

a The pronouns **he** and **his** indicate that this story is told from an omniscient point of view. The narrator informs the reader about the man's situation and thoughts.

b The narrator makes clear that the thoughts and actions are being "set down in words" by the narrator, not by the man in the story.

He closed his eyes in order to fix his last thoughts upon his wife and children. The water, touched to gold by the early sun, the brooding mists under the banks at some distance down the stream, the fort, the soldiers, the piece of drift—all had distracted him. ...

He unclosed his eyes and saw again the water below him. "If I could free my hands," he thought, "I might throw off the noose and spring into the stream. By diving I could evade the bullets and, swimming vigorously, reach the bank, take to the woods and get away home. My home, thank God, is as yet outside their lines; my wife and little ones are still beyond the invader's farthest advance."

As these thoughts, which have here to be set down in words, were flashed into the doomed man's brain rather than evolved from it the captain nodded to the sergeant. The sergeant stepped aside.

From AN OCCURRENCE AT OWL CREEK BRIDGE by Ambrose Bierce, © 1890

CONTENT TOPICS

In *dialogue*, characters other than the narrator may refer to themselves as *I* or *me*. This language does not show point of view. The pronouns *outside* the quotation reveal how the narrator refers to the characters.

1. In the second paragraph, the narrator includes a quotation. Why is this information quoted?
 - A. The quotation indicates that these are the exact thoughts of the man in the story.
 - B. The quotation is included because the man in the story is speaking to the captain.
 - C. The quotation is included because the narrator has overheard the man say these words.
 - D. The quotation shows that the narrator is shifting from the past to the present.

DIRECTIONS: Read the passage, read each question, and choose the **best** answer.

SUNDAYS AND HOLIDAYS

1 During my holidays from school, I was allowed to stay in bed until long after my father had gone to work. He left our house every weekday at the stroke of seven by the Anglican church bell. I would lie in bed awake, and I could hear all the sounds my parents made as they prepared for the day ahead. As my mother made my father his breakfast, my father would shave, using his shaving brush that had an ivory handle and a razor that matched; then he would step outside to the little shed he had built for us as a bathroom, to quickly bathe in water that he had instructed my mother to leave outside overnight in the dew. That way, the water would be very cold, and he believed that cold water strengthened his back. If I had been a boy, I would have gotten the same treatment, but since I was a girl, and on top of that went to school only with other girls, my mother would always add some hot water to my bathwater to take off the chill. On Sunday afternoons, while I was in Sunday school, my father took a hot bath; the tub was half filled with plain water, and then my mother would add a large caldronful of water in which she had just boiled some bark and leaves from a bay-leaf tree. The bark and leaves were there for no reason other than that he liked the smell. He would then spend hours lying in this bath, studying his pool coupons or drawing examples of pieces of furniture he planned to make. When I came home from Sunday school, we would sit down to our Sunday dinner.

From THE CIRCLING HAND by Jamaica Kincaid, © 1985

2. From whose point of view is the passage told?
 - A. the parents'
 - B. the father's
 - C. the mother's
 - D. the girl's
3. The narrator says, "I would lie in bed awake, and I could hear all the sounds my parents made as they prepared for the day ahead." What does the pronoun I indicate?
 - A. The story is a first-person account.
 - B. An omniscient narrator is telling the story.
 - C. All the mother's thoughts will be revealed.
 - D. Readers will not know the girl's thoughts or feelings.
4. Which statement **best** explains the author's purpose in presenting this point of view?
 - A. to provide insight into a family's feelings
 - B. to analyze a father's bathing habits
 - C. to present the thoughts and feelings of one young girl
 - D. to explain what young girls think about their parents
5. The daughter's account of her parents **most** resembles a
 - A. journalist's objective account of a current event.
 - B. diary writer's explanation of daily events in a family.
 - C. poet's expression of personal feelings about family relationships.
 - D. mystery writer's presentation of clues about a crime.