

**Reliable vs unreliable narrator worksheet**

**I'm not robot!**

In the AP® English Lit CED, NAR 4.D tells students to “explain how a narrator’s reliability affects a narrative.” This skill is a tricky one because we introduce skepticism to our students when it comes to our narrator. Later, students sometimes wonder how we spot an unreliable narrator. Some even begin to doubt all narrators, which can lead to misinterpretations. To curb this, emphasize the effect of a narrator’s reliability on the narrator’s motivations, rather than looking for clues or a “gotcha!” moment in a plot. AP® is a trademark registered by the College Board, which is not affiliated with, and does not endorse, this website. Warm-Up Activity: “The Open Doors” Short Film One of the tricky parts about showing an unreliable narrator in media or film is that it often takes a full length movie to demonstrate it. Films like The Sixth Sense, Shutter Island, and Fight Club are awesome for studying unreliability, but will take the whole movie to fully understand it. However, Saki’s “The Open Window” was turned into a very short film and demonstrates an unreliable narrator, at least to a point. This short film, starring Michael Sheen and Charlotte Ritchie, is a perfect adaptation of Saki’s short story. If you wish to read this very short story first, here is the link. Otherwise, it was made perfectly into this 10 minute short film, starring Michael Sheen. Read it if you wish, and then show the film. Afterwards, ask your students the following question: What is the relationship between Vera’s reliability and her motivations? In short, why does she tell lies, or “romance at short notice,” just for fun? In the middle of the story, Vera mentions that it is her aunt’s home, not her own. Whether she is visiting temporarily or is a permanent fixture in the house we don’t know, but it is a clue for us. She’s an outsider. Upon further examination, the men and Mrs. Sappleton don’t speak to her much and Vera seems to spend most of her time observing the people around her. Vera is constantly overlooked, ignored, and even out of place, which may help us understand why she chooses to tell lies for entertainment. Plus, when you think about it, what else is there for the poor girl to do to amuse herself? A Word of Caution: Another problem with film is that you often lose the structure of a true narrator. In “The Open Window,” we’re along for the ride, but there is no real narrator. The best example of an unreliable narrator in film, in my opinion, is the narrator in Fight Club. He truly narrates the film and we begin to realize he’s not trustworthy by the end. However, my short point is this: true study of a narrator’s reliability is best done on a text. Focus Text: “The Yellow Wallpaper” by Charlotte Perkins Gilman In writing all of these Skill Spotlights, several short stories emerge as being crucial short texts for AP® Lit. Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper” is definitely one of them. The story is on the long side, so I’d assign it for homework or ask them to read it before the lesson. A free pdf is available here. From what condition does the narrator suffer?Using textual details and inferences, how would you describe the narrator’s relationship with her husband, John?Where in the text do you begin to suspect the narrator’s reliability? Cite several instances, if possible. To what degree is the narrator aware of her unreliability? Can you spot portions where she actually discusses it?What is the relationship of the narrator’s reliability and our understanding of her motivations? Teacher’s Guide The narrator suffers from anxiety or depression, at least if she were being diagnosed today. In the day it was set, she would be diagnosed with nervous exhaustion and required to rest in a quiet location at all times. Early in the story, the narrator says, “John laughs at me, of course, but one expects that in a marriage.” Nowadays, students would say “red flag” at that line. However, it tells us that John is the head of his house and the sole decision-maker in the family. He often laughs at her notions or calls them silly. Later she says, “I get unreasonably angry with John sometimes.” Instead, she chalks it up to John’s practical nature that he doesn’t believe in anything he cannot see. Later she admits that she disagrees with his suggested treatment, but because he is a physician, she cannot argue with him. In the beginning, the narrator tells us that her husband suspects she makes up stories and gets upset by them (“He says that with my imaginative power and habit of story-making a nervous weakness like mine is sure to lead to all manner of excited fancies.”). With the husband’s tendency to gaslight his wife, at first we dismiss this because we sympathize for the narrator. Later, however, she goes into great detail about the terror that the wallpaper brings, as well as the way the old, hardy chair used to bring her such comfort. She says, “...there was one chair that always seemed like a strong friend. I used to feel that if any of the other things looked too fierce I could always hop into that chair and be safe.” These passages may make one pause, wondering if she is capable of telling us a story reliably. Later on, she says she can see “a strange, provoking, formless sort of figure, that seems to sulk about behind that silly and conspicuous front design.” By this time, we should begin to realize that our narrator is either going mad or else there is something very supernatural happening in the story.Once the narrator begins seeing the woman in the wallpaper, she says, “I know John would think it absurd.” She is aware of how crazy it sounds and won’t tell anyone but her journal. Eventually, however, her privacy moves from concern for her sanity to concern for others, then finally to a desire to keep the secret only to herself. By this final stage, she seems unaware that she is not being rational and has lost herself fully to the madness of the room. This question, taken directly from the CED, seems trickier than it is. It’s asking students to consider the link between the narrator’s desires and her honesty. In the beginning, she wants nothing more than to leave the room and be “normal” again. By the end, however, she looking forward to her time alone with the wallpaper. She considers the mystery of the woman hiding in it a secret only she knows, and therefore looks forward to it. Now, step back and consider the narrator back at the beginning of the story. She has nervous exhaustion and is locked away, against her will, in the top floor of a rental home, which she calls haunted. Despite her pleas, her husband continues to take freedom and free will away from her. The link between her reliability, which disappears as she becomes mad, and her motivations now become clear. Had John given her more freedom, she would have had different motivations and would not have become a captive of the room and its madness. Additional Text Suggestions for Narrator Reliability Here is a list of additional short stories and novels that you can use to help students study a narrator’s reliability. To work for Short Fiction units, I suggest limiting the novels to excerpts of 1-10 pages. Thank you to the AP Lit Facebook community for help in culminating this list! These graphic organizers are available for purchase and can help your students tackle NAR 4.D and other AP® Lit Essential Skills. Short Texts: “The Open Window” by Saki“The Continuity of Parks” by Julio Cortázar“The Tell-Tale Heart” by Edgar Allan Poe“Once Upon a Time” by Nadine GordimerThe Cask of Amontillado” by Edgar Allan Poe“My Last Duchess” by Robert Browning (poem)“House Taken Over” by Julio Cortázar“The Moonlit Road” by Ambrose Bierce“Why I Live at the P.O.” by Eudora Welty“Young Goodman Brown” by Nathaniel Hawthorne“The Wife’s Story” by Ursula K. Le Guin“The Birthday Party” by Katharine Brush Longer Works: Alias Grace by Margaret AtwoodFrankenstein by Mary ShelleyEleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine by Gail HoneymanThe Girl on the Train by Paula HawkinsAtonement by Ian McEwan The Glass Castle by Jeannette WallsThe Kite Runner by Khaled HosseiniThe Poisonwood Bible by Barbara KingsolverThe Great Gatsby by F. Scott FitzgeraldThe Catcher in the Rye by J. D. SalingerWuthering Heights by Emily BrontëThe Things They Carried by Tim O’BrienOne Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest by Ken Kesey Looking for more skill-based lessons? Check out my other free Skill Spotlight lessons here! In order to continue enjoying our site, we ask that you confirm your identity as a human. Thank you very much for your cooperation. This Short Story Bundle is amazing! It is dynamic, unique, rigorous, engaging, and fun with a variety of activities that get students reading, writing, thinking, and talking. 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