

## Let's Get Intimate: Working With Narrative Distance

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**Narrative distance** is the space between your reader and your story. You have the power to pull your reader closer for a more immersive experience or to push them back for a wider view.

### EXAMPLES

#### From *True Grit* by Charles Portis

People do not give it credence that a fourteen-year-old girl could leave home and go off in the wintertime to avenge her father's blood but it did not seem so strange then, although I will say it did not happen every day. I was just fourteen years of age when a coward going by the name of Tom Chaney shot my father down in Fort Smith Arkansas, and robbed him of his life and his horse and \$150 in cash money plus two California gold pieces that he carried in his trouser band.

#### From *The Paying Guests* by Sarah Waters

The Barbers had said they would arrive by three. It was like waiting to begin a journey, Frances thought. She and her mother had spent the morning watching the clock, unable to relax. At half-past two she had gone wistfully over the rooms for what she'd supposed was the final time; after that there had been a nerving-up, giving way to a steady deflation, and now, at almost five, here she was again, listening to the echo of her own footsteps, feeling no sort of fondness for the sparsely furnished spaces, impatient simply for the couple to arrive, move in, get it over with.

#### From *Blood Meridian* by Cormac McCarthy

See the child. He is pale and thin, he wears a thin and ragged linen shirt. He stokes the scullery fire. Outside lie dark turned fields with rags of snow and darker woods beyond that harbor yet a last few wolves. His folk are known for hewers of wood and drawers of water but in truth his father has been a schoolmaster. He lies in drink, he quotes from poets whose names are now lost. The boy crouches by the fire and watches him.

**EXERCISE:** Write or revise a scene using either third or first person POV. Think about where your narrator is in relation to your reader—both in time and in physical proximity. Be deliberate about the perspective and the distance between your narrator and your reader.

## Filters

Filters remind your readers that they are reading, observing, standing apart from the action. Remove them to provide a more immersive experience. Here are a few filters to look for in your own writing:

- Saw, noticed, observed, watched
- Thought, wondered, noted, mused
- Felt, believed, understood
- Remembered, recalled

**I watched** the sun rise over the water.  
The sun rose over the water.

**She felt** the morning sun warm her face. **She knew** it would be a hot day.  
The morning sun warmed her face. It would be a hot day.

She was often late, **he remembered**. **He wondered** if she would be there now or if he would have to wait.

She was often late. Would she be there now or would he have to wait?

## EXAMPLES

### From *The Paying Guests* by Sarah Waters

Oh, but it was pointless to be gloomy. She shook the tears away. What could she do with her afternoon? The darning was all very well, but she ought really take advantage of her mother's doze and do something grimy. The porch needed a sweep; that would be a good job done. It always made her mother twitchy to know she was out there with a broom, where any of the neighbours might stroll past and see her.

But now there were sounds overhead: Lilian was up in her bedroom. Was she dressing to go out? No, the creaks didn't suggest it. She was standing still, the boards wheezing with the shifting of her weight. What *was* she doing?

### From *Blood Meridian* by Cormac McCarthy

He walks through the narrow streets of the port. The air smells of salt and newsawn lumber. At night whores call to him from the dark like souls to want. A week and he is on the move again, a few dollars in his purse that he's earned, walking the sand roads of the southern night alone, his hands balled in the cotton pockets of his cheap coat. Earthen causeways across the marshland. Egrets in their rookeries white as candles among the moss. The wind has a raw edge to it and leaves lope by the roadside and skelter on in the night fields.

**EXERCISE:** Move closer. Identify filtering words and phrases. Revise and rewrite to eliminate most or all of these phrases, especially as you dive deeper into the scene. Show us through the narration what your characters are feeling, hearing, smelling, tasting. Use strong sensory details.

### **Language, Vocabulary, Metaphor**

Focus on the world of your narrator. The benefit of close narration is placing the reader fully in the experience of the story. The reader cannot know or hear or feel anything the narrator doesn't know or hear or feel. And the narrator must use language that is organic to the experience of the story.

### **EXAMPLES**

#### **From “The Crop” by Flannery O’Connor**

Miss Willerton always crumbed the table. It was her particular household accomplishment and she did it with great thoroughness. Lucia and Bertha did the dishes and Garner went into the parlor and did the *Morning Press* crossword puzzle. That left Miss Willerton in the dining room by herself and that was all right with Miss Willerton. Whew! Breakfast in that house was always an ordeal.

#### **From *Caramelo* by Sandra Cisneros**

I like Viva. She spits cuss words out like they're watermelon seeds and knows where the best thrift stores are. We buy old painted Mexican skirts. The cotton ones and the velvet sequin ones with scenes of Taxco or Aztec gods. The longer ones are mine, because my legs are too thick. The little girl skirts Viva claims, the shorter the better she says. If we're lucky we hit Thrift Town on the south side and hunt around for vintage cowboy boots. I found a pair of black Noconas, the pointy ones with the slant heels, for only six dollars! And Viva has a pair of Acmes and a real cute shorty Dale Evans pair. We make Father sew us halter tops out of bandanas and vintage tablecloths—sexy! At least we think so. Father complains we look like ranch people, but what does he know about fashion.

**EXERCISE:** Examine your scene for any vocabulary or metaphor that does not seem organic to your narrator. Would your narrator say “hat” or “cap”? “Sofa” or “couch”? “Refrigerator” or “icebox”? Would your narrator describe a tall person as a skyscraper or a tree? Write to capture the particular rhythms and peculiarities of your narrator’s speech and thought.