**All Great Characters are Unreliable (even your complex and relatable protagonists) Handout CO Gold 2022**

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Often the good and bad guy have the same reason to be unreliable (like Batman and Riddler in *The Batman* - both seek catharsis)

Characters can be innocently unreliable: well-intentioned, wrong but with true conviction, mistaken, naïve, misunderstood, incapable/unaware/diagnosable, incapacitated, desperate, in denial, storytelling, powerless, and endless shortcomings and vulnerability. Then there are the liars, cheaters, status seekers, catharsis seekers, obfuscators, prostraters, misdirectors, deceptive, misrepresenting, unreliable, those who are passive aggressive, evil. Unreliable characters make you love or hate them. Either way, their unreliability is required for the plot – this is one reason novels can’t be one or the other. Characters are laid upon the plot or vice versa.

*Wizard of Oz* is an example of every main character being an unreliable character.

**The innocently unreliable**

Mistaken eyewitness testimony

Normal struggle with memory

The diagnosable Memory (*The Notebook*)

The incapable/unaware/diagnosable guilty (*The Machinist, Shutter Island*)

The incapacitated

The misunderstood

The storyteller/exaggerator

The fragile

Desperate

In denial

Story teller/exaggerator

**The Well Intentioned:**

To Get Attention - *Harold and Maud* - To Die Happy

*Elephant Man* – to dress up and have one wonderful time before committing suicide

Wrong but true conviction

One who misses the meaning

The emotionally taxed

Over average intelligence POV combined with diagnosis (*Rain Man & A Beautiful Mind*)

The one with communication weaknesses (*The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*)

A character like “the great and powerful OZ” (lying to hide his weaknesses)

In the *Wizard of Oz* all the main characters are unreliable

Dorothy doesn’t like Kansas and lies to herself out of naivety.

Lion, Scare Crow and Tin Man all didn’t know themselves

The Good witch holds back the truth until Dorothy learns her lesson

The Wicked Witch pretends to be invulnerable until water shows her weakness

(missing a sense opportunity - Wicked Witch musts have stunk)

*Labyrinth* – same story (naively believes adventure is better than home)

Batman has vulnerabilities he can’t admit to himself

**To protect someone** - rather than alleviate guilt expecting exoneration (like disclosing an affair - *Fatal Attraction*)

**Misrepresentation** (mother’s been captive for 7 years doesn’t tell son in *Room*)

**The Not so Innocent**

The Guilty liars like Spacey’s con artist in *The Usual Suspects*.

The Sneaky - *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*

Add misdirecting, deceptive, misrepresenting, unreliable, possessed, passive aggressive, following orders,

**Unreliable Characters require both character and plotting challenges**

* Need to pull off deception (Gollum in *Lord of the Rings*)
* Need to pull off misunderstanding (*Shutter Island & The Elephant Man*)
* Twisty and Complex (*Pulp Fiction*)
* Need to pull off misdirection
* Need to pull off disabilities (*The Usual Suspects*)
* Evil
* Obeying orders (HAL in 2001 *Space Odyssey)*
* Poor memory (*The Machinist)*
* Cultural context (beliefs/values/etc)
* Balance of duality
* conflicting perceptions (*The Poisonwood Bible*)
* guilt
* incapacitation (Cage in *Leaving Las Vegas*)
* “filling in the blanks”
* Pretending to be happy (T. Hanks in end of *Castaway*)
* Figurative v literal
* Hiding behind bravado (S Weaver in *Alien*)
* Misrepresent (Room-does not tell her 5 year old that she’s been held hostage for 7 years)
* Unreliability
* Naivety
* Paranormal (Kidman in *The Others*)
* Reality as fiction (*Stranger than Fiction*)

**Sometimes the author is the unreliable character:**

Lets reader know but not POV or the reverse

Literal/figurative

**Genre specific author deception**

Memoir and biography:

Knitting pieces of story into logical (even out of order) storyline for sake of adding color, clarity or storytelling needs for a memoir or biography. Even fake memoirs (*The Story of PI* and *Memoirs of a Geisha*)

Historical fiction – make things up, fill in blanks, increase drama (Julie Kaewerts bibliomysteries take real incidents and info and paints around them)

Mysteries

Red herrings

Bad guy may plant false clues

Sci-Fi

Create whole new worlds with different rules and populations

Westerns

Stories that create archetypal heroes and villains in a setting/time not our own

Horror

The exaggerated bad guy and often dumb victim

Romance

The creation of/disclosed fantasy love life

Paraormal

Unknowing (unaware they are dead - *The Others, The Sixth Sense*)

Fantasy

Nonexistent magical powers (*The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, Carol Berg’s novels)

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“What is incident but the illustration of character?” – Henry James

Unreliable character narrator novels recommended:

*The Paris Apartment*

*High Flyer*

*The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*