

**Lesson
Two**

Comparing Different Versions of an Event

Aims

The aims of this lesson are to enable you to

- explain how an account of an event will vary according to the point of view of different speakers or participants
- make clearer distinctions between different kinds of writing about personal experience
- tell stories in the first person ('I') or the third person ('he/she')

Context

The second lesson in the Literary Analysis module again looks at different approaches to story-telling and encourages you to discover some of the secrets for yourself through your own writing. At the end of the lesson you will find your first Tutor-marked test, the answers to which you should send to your tutor who will be able to see how well you have assimilated this material and identify your strengths and weaknesses at the start of your course.



Oxford Open Learning

Introduction: Point of View

In this lesson you will be looking at writing in which the same events are described from the point of view of different speakers. You will be learning how the writer's choice of point of view affects the details and the shaping of his/her account of events.

Read the following passage, using the questions in Lesson One's Route for Reading (see Lesson One, Activity Seven) to help you make notes about any striking features or any problems that it presents to the reader.

The woman Grace sleeps in my room. At night I sometimes see her sitting at the table counting money. She holds a gold piece in her hand and smiles. Then she puts it all into a little canvas bag with a drawstring and hangs the bag round her neck so that it is hidden in her dress. At first she used to look at me before she did this but I always pretended to be asleep, now she does not trouble about me. She drinks from a bottle on the table then she goes to bed, or puts her arms on the table, her head on her arms and sleeps. But I lie watching the fire die out. When she is snoring I get up and I have tasted the drink without colour in the bottle. The first time I did this I wanted to spit it out but managed to swallow it. When I got back into bed I could remember more and think again. I was not so cold.

Suddenly I felt very miserable in that room, though the couch I was sitting on was so soft that I sank into it. It seemed to me that I was going to sleep. Then I imagined that I heard a footstep and I thought what will they say, what will they do if they find me here? I held my right wrist with my left hand and waited. But it was nothing. I was very tired after this. Very tired. I wanted to get out of the room but my own candle had burned down and I took one of the others. Suddenly I was in Aunt Cora's room. I saw the sunlight coming through the window, the tree outside and the shadows of the leaves on the floor, but I saw the wax candles too and I hated them. So I knocked them all down. Most of them went out but one caught the thin curtains that were behind the red ones. I laughed when I saw the lovely colour spreading so fast, but I did not stay to watch it. I went into the hall again with the tall candle in my hand. It was then that I saw her - the ghost. The woman with streaming hair. She was surrounded by a gilt frame but I knew her. I dropped the candle I was carrying and it caught the end of a tablecloth and I saw flames shoot up. As I ran or perhaps floated or flew I called help me Christophine help me and looking behind me I saw that I had been helped. There was a wall of fire protecting me but it was too hot, it scorched me and I went away from it.

(*Wide Sargasso Sea*, Jean Rhys, 146-7 & 154.)

Activity 1

What kind of writing is this? It is writing about personal experience, but is it part of a diary? Is it part of an autobiography? Is it part of a letter?

In your own words, give evidence for and against its being a:

- Diary Extract
- Letter Extract
- Autobiographical Extract.

You should consider the way the writing is set out on the page, the sentence structures used, the way experience is reported: Is the reporting brief; concerned with facts of time, place, weather; objective and detached; subjective and emotive; does it distinguish clearly between external events and inner feelings?



Suggested Answer to Activity 1

Diary: For; The writing seems to be concerned with private, even secret personal experience. If it is a diary, it is not a record of mundane daily external events. The repetitive structure of the sentences, 'I saw...', 'I dropped...', 'I laughed...' has a relentless monotonous effect, and does not help the reader to visualise what the speaker is doing. Because the writing does not seem to be designed for an audience, it may be a private diary of feelings.

Diary: Against; There are no dates given to explain the entries. If this is a diary of personal feelings, then there seems to be a contradiction between what is told and the way it is told. We are reading about someone who seems to be suffering strong emotions of misery, fear and even hysteria, yet the experiences are spoken about in clear, simple language which is objective rather than emotional.

Letter: For; This could be a personal letter, perhaps to a friend, because this would explain why the writer tried to set down the emotions and experiences in a way that would be comprehensible to someone else. The writer would assume that the person written to would be interested in what is happening because of personal interest in the writer, not because of any interesting features of description or narration.

Letter: Against; There are none of the features of layout appropriate to a letter. There is no explicit address to or mention of an intended reader. The speaker seems to be so disturbed that we might doubt whether she is capable of expressing herself in a letter.

Autobiography: For; These might be sections of an autobiography, especially if we assume that the first section gives more factual details of a period in someone's life (perhaps childhood) when they did not understand all that was happening around them. The second section could be an account of a dream the writer has had. If the experiences described are now recollected in later life, this would explain how the writing stands back from the experiences described; the writer would be remembering a very difficult time, but describing it from a distance provided by the passage of time.

Autobiography: Against; If the writer is standing back from a former difficult experience, why are the forms of sentences and the ways of linking clauses so unvaried and limited? Why is there no analysis or explanation of what is happening? Why is the tone of voice of the narrator so naive and why does she not describe her feelings in a way that makes them clearer to the reader?

Activity 2

Suppose that the speaker of this passage is a child; collect all the evidence you can from the passage to suggest this and list it.



Suggested Answer to Activity 2

The speaker is being looked after by Grace.

The speaker is not used to drinking alcohol.

It seems that the speaker is not allowed to be out of bed at night or to move around the house.

She is afraid of getting into trouble if she is found alone in the house.

She knocks down the candles, apparently not understanding the danger of fire.

She laughs and talks about the 'lovely colour' of the fire, and she hates the candles without apparent reason: she doesn't behave rationally in adult terms.

Activity 3

Re-write the second paragraph in the third person ('he' or 'she' rather than 'I').

Re-tell the events as objectively as possible, enabling your reader to see what is happening, as if the events were being watched from the outside. In your version, do not try to explain inner feelings; keep to what can be observed by a detached viewer. To help you do this, you should present your piece of writing as if it were a formal report written by someone whose job it is to keep a secret watch upon the speaker of the passage. You should decide whether this speaker is a man or a woman, a child or an adult. Begin like this:

'14th October, 10.50 p.m.

The subject was lying on the couch in the corner of the room, and I supposed that s/he was asleep, when...'

You may find that certain parts of the passage cannot be described from an objective point of view, and you may decide to omit them altogether.

You should concentrate on describing the outward movements, and facial expression of your subject, and report any sounds made or words spoken. You may wish to use some of the following expressions:

I observed that...	It seemed that...	As I followed...
I thought...	From where I stood...	It appeared that...
I noticed...	From behind the door...	I deduced...
From my position...	I interpreted this as...	
I had the impression that...		



Suggested Answer to Activity Three

14th October, 10.50 p.m.

The subject was lying on the couch in the corner of the room and I supposed that she was asleep, when I noticed that she was holding her right wrist in her left hand in a manner that suggested she was still awake and worried about something.

After a further period of trying to get to sleep, the girl got up suddenly and went to pick up a candle from the table, her own having burnt right down. Carrying this, She made her way to Cora's room and I was able to follow unobserved behind. The thick red curtains were drawn and the only light came from candles on the table. It seemed that a look of rage and frustration came over the girl's face and suddenly she knocked over all the candles. Fortunately, most of them went out, but one flame must have caught the thin curtains behind the red ones, as they quickly went up in flames. The girl made no attempt to put out the fire but laughed at what she had done and left the room, leaving the house at great risk of burning down.

Worse was to follow. In the corridor, the girl stopped suddenly, as if disturbed by some terrible thought or sight. As though in a trance, she dropped the candle she was carrying, and this sent the end of a tablecloth up in flames. There was still a look of terror on her face but not at the fire she had caused. As she ran away, she called out 'help me, Christopher!' (or something like that). She turned round to look at the wall of flame but her smile suggested that she was pleased at what she had done and no longer worried. She continued to hurry away with no sense of responsibility for what she had done. In a child this would be understandable, but in a young woman it suggests madness.

Check:

were you able to include some of the things that seem to be entirely in the imagination of the speaker of the original passage?

The imagined footstep – was it real or imagined in your account?

The room being perceived as Aunt Cora's.

The sunlight casting shadows on the floor – this is night-time.

The ghost – the woman with the streaming hair.

The floating or flying sensation.

The sense of being helped.

Activity 4

Read the following passage which is in a different style:

“You shall tell me this part of the story another time,” I said; “but now I have a particular reason for wishing to hear all about the fire. Was it suspected that this lunatic, Mrs. Rochester, had any hand in it?”

“You’ve hit it, ma’am: it’s quite certain that it was her, and nobody but her, that set it going. She had a woman to take care of her called Mrs. Poole – an able woman in her line, and very trustworthy, but for one fault – a fault common to a deal of them nurses and matrons – *she kept a private bottle of gin by her*, and now and then took a drop over-much. It is excusable, for she had a hard life of it: but it still was dangerous; for when Mrs. Poole was fast asleep after the gin and water, the mad lady, who was as cunning as a witch, would take the keys out of her pocket, let herself out of her chamber, and go roaming about the house, doing any wild mischief that came into her head. They say she had nearly burnt her husband in his bed once: but I don’t know about that. However, on this night, she set fire first to the hangings of the room next to her own, and then she got down to a lower storey, and made her way to the chamber that had been the governess’s – (she was like as if she knew somehow how matters had gone on, and had a spite at her) – and she kindled the bed there; but there was nobody sleeping in it, fortunately.”

(...)

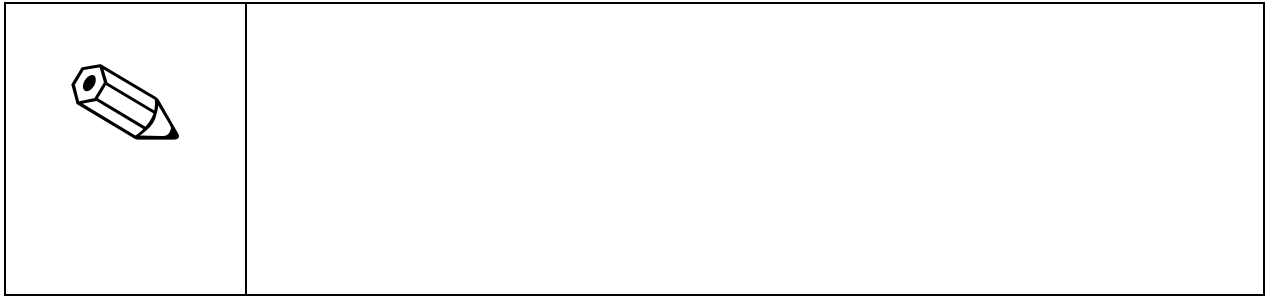
“Then Mr. Rochester was at home when the fire broke out?”

“Yes, indeed was he; and he went up to the attics when all was burning above and below, and got the servants out of the beds and helped them down himself, and went back to get his mad wife out of her cell. And then they called out to him that she was on the roof, where she was standing, waving her arms above the battlements, and shouting out till they could hear her a mile off: I saw her and heard her with my own eyes. She was a big woman, and had long black hair: we could see it streaming against the flames as she stood. I witnessed, and several more witnessed, Mr. Rochester ascend through the skylight on to the roof; we heard him call ‘Bertha!’ We saw him approach her; and then, ma’am, she yelled and gave a spring, and the next minute she lay smashed on the pavement.”

“Dead?”

This passage (*Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Brontë, pp 452-453; Penguin) deals with the same people and events, but from a different perspective and in a different style.

Having read this passage, can you now give a name to the speaker of the first passage? Make a list of all the people, named and un-named, who are mentioned or take part in this passage.



Specimen Answer to Activity 4

You might have included the following characters:

The questioner ('I')

The person questioned, who tells the story, and calls the questioner 'ma'am' — short for 'madam'

Mr. Rochester

Bertha, Mrs. Rochester

Grace Poole

The Governess


The servants

The 'others' who witnessed the fire along with the teller

Activity 5

- What can we deduce about the main speaker in this piece of dialogue?
- What is his/her relationship to the questioner?
- What is his/her social class (consider the way s/he speaks)?
- How does he/she know about the events he/she describes?
- What is his/her attitude to Mrs. Poole?
- To Bertha Rochester?

Support all your conclusions with evidence or quotation from the text.

	
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Suggested Answer to Activity 5

It seems that the main speaker is the servant of the person she/he is talking to, to judge from the respect with which he obeys her instructions, and the way she/he calls her 'ma'am'. It is probable the speaker is male. It is difficult to be sure of the speaker's social class because the speech is a mixture of colloquialisms ('you've hit it,' 'took a drop overmuch', 'had a spite at her,' etc) and quite sophisticated language ('made her way to the chamber that had been the governess's', 'settled an annuity on her for life,' etc). On balance, we might guess that the speaker is intended to be working class.

It is not clear how he knows about the events he describes. It is possible that he has heard the story from an eye-witness such as Mrs. Poole or that this is the generally agreed version of events. It is clear that he was present on the night of the fire, since he saw Mrs. Rochester on the roof.

His attitude to Mrs. Poole is quite respectful, even friendly, even though he has identified her main fault, her tendency to drink too much gin. He has no doubts that Mrs. Rochester is mad, as well as being 'as cunning as a witch', but there are few signs of either sympathy or resentment.

Activity 6

Explain in your own words the meanings of the following words and phrases:

You've hit it

An able woman in her line

She kept a private bottle of gin by her

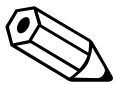
She had a hard life of it

Took a drop overmuch

She was like as if she knew somehow how matters had gone on

Had a spite at her

All these are **colloquialisms** used by the speaker.



Suggested Answers to Activity 6

You've hit it = You have worked things out correctly.

An able woman in her line = A capable woman at her job

She kept a private bottle of gin by her = She had hidden a bottle of gin for her own personal use.

She had a hard life of it = In her position, things were very difficult.

Took a drop overmuch = Had one drink too many

She was like as if she knew somehow how matters had gone on = it seemed from her actions that she knew what had been happening.

Had a spite at her = Had a grudge against her.

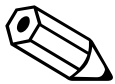
Activity 7

Is the main speaker in this passage a detached, objective narrator of events?

In your answer, you should consider whether this speaker:

- Presents opinion as if it were fact
- Keeps his or her own opinions of people out of the account
- Could have witnessed everything that s/he tells
- Assumes that the listener will agree with his/her views
- Is more sympathetic to some of the people involved than to others.

Decide in what ways this teller is biased, and give examples from the passage. You may also use your knowledge of the first passage in your answer.



Suggested Answer to Activity 7

The main speaker is not by any means a detached, objective narrator of events, although it is quite a reasonable, plausible account.

His opinion that Mrs. Rochester is 'mad' (expressed twice) and 'as cunning as a witch' makes him take various things for granted that he cannot know for facts. He cannot be sure of the exact circumstances that led to the fire, yet he is 'quite certain that it was her, and nobody but her, that set it going.'

The speaker's description of Mr. Rochester's actions suggests that he has a high opinion of the latter. He seems to be assuming that Mr. Rochester made a heroic attempt to save her life and that he is not responsible in any way for her decision to jump.

Reading the first passage may make us more favourably disposed towards Mrs. Rochester, although you should remember that this was written by a different author. We cannot be sure how far Charlotte Brontë would have gone along with the servant's account of these events. We cannot be as sure about what has actually happened as he claims to be.

Summary

You have now completed the section of this module designed to set you on the road to literary analysis by helping you write about personal experience. In each of the lessons you have seen how writers can use language skilfully to persuade a reader of the truth of what they are saying about their experience. But through careful reading, we often realise that there would be other ways of describing the same events, and that a different writer would probably notice different things.

Sometimes two accounts of the same event may disagree on the most basic points. A writer tries to convince us of his or her viewpoint, but we should try to keep an open mind and make our own judgments on the basis of all the evidence.

By now you have worked through plenty of activities and self-assessment tests. The time has come to show your tutor what you can do!

Tutor-marked Assignment A

Allow two hours. Answer all three questions.

When you have finished and checked your work, send your answers to your tutor who will mark them and return them to you. You will appreciate that although suggested answers will be provided for this assignment, it is based on your personal experience and your tutor's comments will be more important.

The assignments in this test will enable you to use your skills in:

- (a) Writing from personal experience
- (b) Writing creatively about imaginary experience
- (c) Directed writing in response to given material
- (d) Writing with an awareness of audience and style

1. Write about an experience you can remember from your childhood.

Notes:

You should try to concentrate on a particular incident which you can describe clearly. You should write about it in detail so that your reader can imagine what happened and how you felt about it.

- 2.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep
But I have promises to keep.
And miles to go before I sleep.
And miles to go before I sleep.

This is the last verse of a poem. The first part of your assignment is to convert it into a piece of prose writing. (Prose writing includes most writing which is not poetry, such as stories, reports, descriptions, information.)

The second part of your assignment is to plan and write an account of an imaginary experience which *ends* with the piece of writing you have produced from the poem.

Notes:

You will need to imagine an event which leads up to the given ending. Try not to produce a long complicated story: it is better to concentrate on one or two incidents. Write your account in the first person ('I').

3. You have just seen a road accident in which the driver of a red Mini Cooper was killed.

- (a) The police arrive at the scene and take a witness statement from you.

Write an account of what you saw and include a diagram of what you think happened.

Notes:

Before you go ahead with writing, read part (b) of this question, as you are aiming for a contrast between the two pieces of writing you produce. You should write your answer to a) in the first person. Describe the accident as you saw it, including any vehicles and pedestrians that may have been present. Don't forget to note the time of day or night, the direction you were facing, the direction any vehicles were travelling in, their approximate speed, number of passengers and any other details you may have noticed that you think are important.

- (b) A novelist specialising in writing crime fiction uses a court case report of a fatal road accident as the basis for information on which to base a getaway scene in his or her novel.

Write the novel's getaway scene as if you were the crime writer.

Notes:

The witness statement should be written as clearly and accurately as possible. You may be questioned about it later by the police, or as a witness in court.

The crime fiction scene should be written in a style to match the story. You will need to decide whether the scene comes early on in a longer story, or will be the climax of something that happened earlier. You should aim to engage your reader in the suspense of the moment.