

THROUGH THE EYES OF THE ANCIENT OAK

Mastering Perspective & Voice in Narrative Writing

"I have witnessed a thousand summers, felt the fingers of countless children climb my branches, and harbored the whispered secrets of generations. If only these humans knew what their ancient guardian has seen..."

NSW Scholarship Exam Preparation

Week 4: Exploring how perspective shapes narrative and creates distinctive voices

The Writing Prompt

Tell a story from the perspective of a centuries-old oak tree that has witnessed generations of human lives.

In Today's Masterclass:

- 👁️ Controlling narrative perspective: first, second, and third person
- 🎙️ Developing a distinctive narrative voice with authority
- 🕶️ Using perspective to strategically reveal or conceal information
- 📖 Creating narrative distance or intimacy with your reader

*"A tree's perspective spans centuries, not moments.
How might this change the way a story unfolds?"*

NARRATIVE PERSPECTIVE

The Lens Through Which Your Story Is Told

First Person Perspective

Uses **pronouns**: I, me, my, we, our

Effect: Creates intimacy and immediacy; limited to what the narrator knows or perceives

*"I have stood in this grove for four hundred years, my roots drinking from the same cool stream that has nourished generations of human children. I remember when they built that schoolhouse—a mere sixty summers ago—how my bark shivered as they cleared my companions. **TOUCH** They never knew how I wept sap for my fallen brothers, how I listened to their silent screams carried away on the autumn wind."* **SOUND**

Second Person Perspective

Uses **pronouns**: You, your

Effect: Pulls reader directly into the narrative; creates sense of involvement or accusation

*"You stand immobile as the seasons change around you. You feel the weight of centuries in your rings, each one a memory, a story. When the young couple carves their initials into your trunk, you remember their grandparents doing the same, and their pain becomes your pain, a scar you will bear until your final day. **PAIN** You taste the changing air as pollution creeps into the soil through your roots, bitter and wrong."* **TASTE**

Third Person Perspective

Uses **pronouns**: He, she, it, they, his, her, their

Effect: Creates distance; can be limited or omniscient, allowing broader scope

*"The ancient oak watched silently as it had for centuries. Its gnarled branches creaked in the evening breeze, leaves rustling with secrets too old for human ears. **SOUND** The old tree had witnessed the rise and fall of empires, had felt the blood of soldiers seep into its roots during the civil war, had tasted gunpowder and fear in the air. **SMELL** Now it observed the young girl approaching with a book, seeking the same shade that it had offered her grandmother decades before."*

Perspective Changes How the Story Unfolds





When writing as the ancient oak, your choice of perspective fundamentally changes what can be known, felt, and expressed. It determines not just how the story is told, but which stories can be told at all.

DEVELOPING A DISTINCTIVE VOICE

Bringing Your Ancient Oak to Life

Non-Human Perspective Techniques

A tree's voice must reflect its unique experience of time, space, and perception.

-  **Altered Time Perception:** Seasons over seconds, centuries over days
-  **Different Senses:** Feeling through roots, drinking sunlight, sensing vibrations
-  **Stationary Perspective:** The world moves around the oak, not vice versa
-  **Cyclical Worldview:** Patterns and repetitions humans miss

"Humans measure their lives in heartbeats—I count mine in lightning strikes and droughts. What they call history, I call yesterday. Their 'ancient' buildings rose from acorns I dropped, their 'oldest' families germinated in my shade." TIME

Language and Vocabulary

Choose words that reflect your narrator's unique relationship to the world.

*"I don't walk among them—I **anchor** and **stretch** and **witness**. Their children **alight** on my branches like songbirds, their tears **nourish** my roots like summer rain, their wars **scar** me deeper than lightning."* METAPHOR

Creating an Authentic Worldview

How would a centuries-old tree interpret human behaviors and events?

"The ones they call 'powerful' last no longer than mayflies. I've seen kings and presidents come and go, brief as shadows at noon. The ones who truly shape this land are not those who claim to rule it, but those who tend it—the farmer whose hands have caressed the soil for fifty springs, the woman who plants saplings where forest once stood. They understand that true power is measured in seasons, not elections." PHILOSOPHY

Ways to develop this worldview:

- Consider what would matter to a being that lives for centuries
- Explore how seasons and weather would shape perception
- Imagine how human conflicts might appear from a timeless perspective
- Think about what forms of beauty a tree might recognize that humans overlook

Sensory Palette

Develop unique sensory experiences a tree might have:

What a Tree Feels:

"The drought scorches through my innermost rings, my leaves curl and gasp, desperate for moisture. The pain of thirst is slow, creeping death." PAIN

What a Tree Hears:

"Human words are but brief interruptions in the eternal song of wind and bird and beetle. I listen instead to the whispers of worms beneath, the gossip of roots intertwined." SOUND

Voice Exercise

Write three sentences from the ancient oak's perspective describing a human wedding ceremony held beneath its branches. Consider how the tree would perceive time, emotion, and the significance of this ritual compared to others it has witnessed.

STRATEGIC PERSPECTIVE

Revealing & Concealing Information

Creating Mystery

A tree's limited perspective creates natural opportunities for mystery and tension.

*"The woman buried something at my roots one moonless night. Her tears fell like acid rain as she dug, her hands bleeding onto my bark. **TOUCH** For decades after, men came with shovels and questions, but only I knew where she had placed her secret, and why she never returned."* **MYSTERY**

Why it works: The tree witnesses the burial but doesn't understand human motivations fully. It sees actions but can't access human thoughts, creating a compelling knowledge gap.




The Long View

Use the oak's centuries of observation to reveal patterns invisible to short-lived humans.

*"Four generations of Schmidt children have climbed my branches. I recognize their genetic signature in the weight of their steps, the rhythm of their breathing. **PATTERN** The current boy doesn't know that his great-grandfather carved the same heart, with different initials, in the same spot where he now sits contemplating his homework. Family traits persist like drought rings in my core—violence in some lineages, compassion in others."* **TIME**

Limitations Create Tension

What can your tree narrator not know or perceive?

-  **Cannot move** to investigate sounds beyond its reach
-  **Cannot understand** human technology or cultural references
-  **Cannot hear** whispered conversations far from its trunk

*"The strange metal object they brought gleamed in the sunlight. They pointed it at my highest branches where the birds had built their sanctuary. A terrible sound—louder than thunder, sharper than lightning—and then silence. **SOUND** Something wet and warm spattered across my leaves. The birds never returned. I still don't understand what happened that day, only that something precious was lost."* **CONFUSION**

Same Event, Different Perspectives

Human Perspective

"The wildfire devastated ten thousand acres in three days. Firefighters battled the blaze for a week before containing it. Officials estimate the property damage at \$25 million."

Ancient Oak's Perspective

"The great burning came with the dry season, as it has a hundred times before. I heard my children screaming as they fell. Those without deep roots always perish first—a necessary cleansing. In three decades, new growth will flourish, stronger for the ashes."

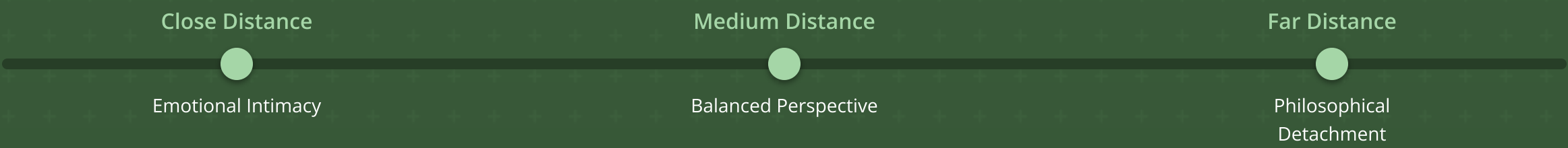
WISDOM

Application Exercise

Describe a murder that takes place beneath the ancient oak's branches. What crucial details would the tree witness—and what critical information would remain hidden from its perspective?

NARRATIVE DISTANCE & INTIMACY

Controlling Reader Proximity to Your Ancient Oak



♥ Creating Intimacy

Pull readers close to your ancient oak's experience through these techniques:

- 👂 Immediate sensory details that feel present and visceral
- 💬 Direct address to reader or other characters
- 💧 Vulnerable emotions that reveal the tree's inner life

*"The chainsaw's teeth bite into my flesh, and I scream in a language no human can hear. My sap weeps from the wound, sticky with centuries of stored sunlight. **PAIN** Four hundred years of patient growth severed in moments. Do you know what it is to lose a limb that took a century to grow? To feel your own heartwood exposed to air for the first time? **VULNERABILITY** This is not the first assault I have endured, child. Your grandfather's grandfather tried the same with a rusted axe, and still I stand."*

▲ Creating Distance

Step back to give your oak perspective and authority through:

- ⌚ Temporal distance from centuries of observation
- 📖 Philosophical reflection on human patterns
- 🏛️ Formal language that conveys authority and wisdom

*"Human civilizations rise and fall with the predictable rhythm of seasons. **TIME** The stone structures they once called eternal now lie beneath my roots, their purpose forgotten, their builders' names unspoken for three hundred years. The hill where I stand has witnessed twelve human settlements, each believing itself permanent, each returning eventually to soil. **WISDOM** The pattern never varies—ambition, expansion, hubris, collapse. Only the tools change. The latest iteration builds in glass and steel, but their foundations remain as shallow as their foresight."*

When to Use Intimacy

- For emotional impact and reader connection
- When revealing personal trauma or joy
- To make the inhuman feel relatable
- During pivotal moments in the narrative

Mixing Distance for Effect

Strategic shifts between intimacy and distance create powerful narrative moments:

*"For three centuries, I have observed human wars with detached curiosity. Their conflicts are brief; their reasons, transient. **[DISTANT]** But today, when the child soldier collapses against my trunk, his blood seeping into my bark, something shifts within me. I feel his final heartbeats as my own, taste his fear like bitter frost. **TASTE** My branches bend lower, cradling him as no human arms remain to do. **[INTIMATE]** Perhaps this is why we ancient ones were placed here—not merely to witness, but to remember when all others have forgotten." **EMOTION***

THE SENSORY WORLD OF THE OAK

Reimagining Perception Through A Tree's Experience

Environmental Awareness

Trees perceive the world through unique environmental sensitivities:

"The storm approached hours before humans sensed it—pressure dropping against my bark, sap flowing differently through my veins. TOUCH I tasted the metallic promise of lightning in the air, a flavor both thrilling and terrifying. TASTE My leaves turned their silver undersides to the sky, a surrender and preparation I've performed ten thousand times before."

Environmental Perception Techniques:

- Weather changes felt through bark and roots
- Seasonal transitions as profound physical transformations
- Light as a form of nourishment rather than just illumination
- Vibrations through the ground as a form of "hearing"

Underground Networks

Explore how trees communicate through root systems and fungi:

"While humans argue above, I converse below. Through the mycelium network, I share water with my drought-stricken neighbor, receive warnings of beetle attacks from trees a mile distant. COMMUNICATION This slow language of chemical transfers has no words in human tongues. Their screaming matches last minutes; our conversations span seasons, thoughtful and deliberate."

Time Perception

Trees experience time differently—use this to create unique perspective:

Fast Time (Human Perspective):

"The child grew into an adult in what seemed like moments, her visits to my shade becoming less frequent with each passing year."

Slow Time (Oak's Experience):

"The child's fingernails against my bark—each cell recording the pressure, the pattern, the warmth—a sensation I will savor and remember when her grandchildren's children climb these same branches." MEMORY

"Humans speak of seasons; I experience them as states of being—winter is not cold but a slow meditation, a gathering inward of resources, a dreamtime where memories are sorted and stored. Their 'years' mean nothing when measured against the slow unfurling of my existence, where decades pass like breaths."

TIME

Pain and Pleasure

Create emotional impact by reimagining tree sensations:

"The axe blow was not simply pain—it was an existential shock, a severing not just of my limb but of possibilities, of futures, of leaf-years unnumbered. PAIN The agony lingered for decades, the wound slowly healing, bark gradually growing over trauma. Yet in spring when the boy tied his swing to my remaining branch, the gentle rhythmic weight of his joy was worth the sacrifice—his laughter a different kind of sunlight, nourishing parts of me that photosynthesis never reaches." PLEASURE

Writing tip: Contrast is powerful—the ancient oak experiences both immense suffering (forest fires, lightning strikes) and profound joys (birdsong, children playing) that span timeframes impossible for humans to comprehend.

Sensory Challenge

Write a paragraph from your oak's perspective about experiencing the same human visitor in three different seasons. Include at least one unique sensory perception for each season that would be impossible from a human perspective.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

Masterful Examples from the Ancient Oak

Combining Multiple Perspective Techniques

This example demonstrates first-person perspective, sensory detail, temporal shifts, and strategic knowledge gaps:

"I have held their secrets for generations, these humans who carve initials and whisper promises beneath my canopy. FIRST PERSON Today, the young woman presses her palm against my bark, her fingertips finding the heart her great-grandmother carved eighty summers ago. TOUCH She doesn't know that her ancestor stood in this same spot with tearstained cheeks, that I tasted her grief when she buried something precious at my roots. KNOWLEDGE GAP How strange to watch this cycle repeat—the same family blood, the same human pain, flowing through different vessels across time. TEMPORAL PERSPECTIVE I could tell her where to dig, what secrets lie beneath, but my language of rustling leaves and shifting shadows remains indecipherable to her kind."

- First Person
- Sensory Detail
- Temporal Distance
- Strategic Information Control
- Non-human Perception

Shifting Narrative Distance

Moving from philosophical distance to intimate connection:

"Civilizations rise and fall within the span of a few rings in my heartwood. Human monuments crumble, languages die, borders shift like wind-blown leaves. DISTANT But this child—this fragile creature whose weight upon my lowest branch is no more than a squirrel's—she matters to me in ways I cannot explain. When her tears fall upon my roots, I draw them in, holding her grief inside me. INTIMATE Her small fingers trace the ridges of my bark as she tells me secrets she shares with no other living being. In these moments, I am not merely witness to humanity but participant in it. EMOTIONAL CONNECTION Perhaps this is why the Old Ones rooted us here—not just to observe, but to remember for those who forget too quickly."

Voice Through Unique Metaphors

Creating distinctive voice through tree-centered metaphors:

"Humans mark time like impatient saplings, always straining toward their next season. TREE METAPHOR Their minutes and hours mean nothing to me—I measure existence by the slow migration of stars, by the gradual shift of river paths, by the layering of generations like sediment beneath my spreading roots. UNIQUE PERCEPTION What they call history, I call memory; what they call ancient, I call recent. Their greatest traumas are but momentary storms in the vast weather system of time, fierce but fleeting. TEMPORAL PERSPECTIVE Their joy is sunlight—intense, warming, essential, but never constant. They live in the urgent present while I exist in the patient eternal."

NSW Scholarship Excellence: Checklist for Your Oak's Perspective

✔ Perspective Excellence

- Choose perspective deliberately (first, second, or third person)
- Maintain consistent narrative voice throughout
- Show human events from a non-human viewpoint
- Create meaningful contrast between tree and human perception
- Use perspective to limit or expand what is known

✔ Sensory & Temporal Mastery

- Incorporate unique tree-centered sensory experiences
- Show both incredibly slow and fast time perception
- Create emotional resonance despite inhuman perspective
- Vary narrative distance for emotional impact
- Use metaphors that reflect arboreal rather than human experience

YOUR FINAL ASSIGNMENT

Bringing the Ancient Oak to Life

Major Writing Task

Write a 500-word narrative piece titled "Through the Eyes of the Ancient Oak" that demonstrates your mastery of perspective and voice.

Choose **ONE** of these prompts:

1. The ancient oak witnesses a significant historical event
2. The oak observes multiple generations of a single family
3. The oak faces a threat to its existence (fire, development, disease)
4. The oak communicates with a human who can understand it

Success Criteria:

- ☐ Establish and maintain a consistent point of view (1st, 2nd, or 3rd person)
- ☐ Develop a distinctive narrative voice appropriate for a centuries-old tree
- ☐ Include at least five sensory details unique to a tree's perception
- ☐ Demonstrate control of narrative distance (intimate and/or detached)
- ☐ Use perspective strategically to reveal and conceal information

NSW Scholarship Excellence

To achieve excellence in your examination response:

💡 Examiner Insights

- Examiners reward inventive perspectives that sustain consistent internal logic
- Top responses demonstrate precise control of language and voice
- Strong narratives balance philosophical reflection with emotional resonance
- Successful responses often experiment with time in unexpected ways

Planning Your Response:

Before writing, consider these essential questions:

- ❓ What unique sensory experiences would a tree have that humans don't?
- ❓ How would centuries of observation shape the oak's philosophy and attitude?
- ❓ What aspects of human behavior might confuse or intrigue an ancient tree?
- ❓ Which perspective (1st/2nd/3rd) best serves your specific story?

"Remember: I am not simply a different character—I am an entirely different form of consciousness, one that experiences time, sensation, and meaning in ways fundamentally unlike human perception. Let this difference infuse every word I speak, every observation I make."

Next Week

Week 5: Crafting Evocative Settings - Creating Worlds That Readers Can See, Hear, Smell, Taste and Feel

"The ancient oak provides not just a perspective, but stands at the center of an entire world—one we'll learn to build in rich sensory detail."