Identifying Narrative Style

Lessons from the study of narrative have been applied to create a twenty-five question quiz which will recommend the narrative style best for the sort of story you have in mind. Try the quiz here on paper, or try the latest version online at **narrative.mathcs.wilkes.edu**. This is a work in progress, so please sure to direct any comments or feedback to anthony.kapolka@wilkes.edu

1. The Quiz

To take this quiz, you'll need to keep track of three values, which we will call A, C, and D after Stanzel's three axes. For each question, a + or – will indicate whether to add or subtract one point (1) to each value. Start each at zero. For each question, either add or subtract the value(s) indicated based on your answer. For example, answering the first question 'story' gives you running values of A=1, C=0, D=1 but if instead you answered 'character' you'd have A=0, C=1, D=-1. Don't think too hard about a question; if it doesn't seem applicable, skip it. There are no right answers.

The quiz begins on the next page.

Act (What happens in the story?)

1. Is the story the main thing, or is it more about character(s)?

   Story = +A, +D or Character = +C, -D

2. Is the action complex/grandiose or subtle?

   Complex = +D or Subtle = -D

3. Is there a lot of character dialog, or scenic description?

   Dialog = +C, +D or Scenic description = +A

4. Is the ending open ended/ambiguously resolved?

   Yes = +C, -D

5. Does the main character have an epiphany?

   Yes = -D

Scene (Where/When does the story take place?)

6. Do plot events occur over a short time span?

   Yes = +C   No = +A

7. Can a single character get to all the scenes?

   Yes = +C   No +A

8. Are the "rules of the world" different than in our world?

   Yes = +A

9. Will you summarize parts of the story to compress time?

   Yes = +A, +C

10. Do events take place simultaneously?

    Yes =+A

Agent (Who is doing the action?)

11. Are several characters equally important?

    Yes = +A, +D

12. Does a main character have a unique perspective on the world or
    is the main estranged from other characters, naïve or disturbed?

    Yes = +C

13. Do we hear thoughts of characters besides the narrator?

    Yes = +A, -C

14. Do you want to convey intimate character thoughts?

    Yes = -A

15. Are there significant non-character caused events?

    Yes = +D, -C

Agency (How is the story revealed?)

16. Does the story require you to provide background/educate the reader about a
    subject?

    Yes = +A, +D

17. Do you want to conceal events from the reader? Is the story is a puzzle for the
    reader?

    Yes = +C, -D

18. Is narrator aware of and trying to convince/manipulate the reader?

    Yes = +C, +A or No = –D

19. Are story events presented in chronological order?

    Yes = -A

20. Do you want to reveal things as they happen/write in the present tense?

    Yes = -A, -C

Purpose (Why is the story told?)

21. You aren't really sure of your goals for this story.

    Yes = –A, -C

22. Does your narrator have a personal motivation to tell story?

    Yes = +C or No +D

23. Is your narrator searching for meaning or talking as therapy?

    Yes = +C, -D

24. Do characters have a lot of thoughts or ideas in the story?

    Yes = +C, -D

25. Is the story meant to capture a greater truth about existence?

    Yes = +A, +D

2. Interpreting the Results

You should finish the quiz with three values in the range -4 to 12 for A and C, and -8 to 8 for D. These numbers represent your story's affinity to the Authorial, Character, and Dramatic poles. The range of the first two numbers is asymmetric because most existing works skew toward the Authorial and Character poles rather than the opposite (unnamed) poles. Writers make good use of both Dramatic and Figural narration, however, so that value is evenly distributed.

Looking at your results, it probably isn't obvious where your choices set you down in Stanzel's topology. To make use of these three numbers we need to combine them to identify a spot on the graph. Each value can be thought of as vector, a distance along its corresponding axis, but because Stanzel identified three axes (rather than an orthogonal Cartesian pair, X and Y) the math gets tricky. To avoid this, Table 1 will let you look up a conversion from each axis to a pair of numbers, X and Y. This supplies the original number broken up into its equivalent Cartesian coordinates. This is easy to see for the Dramatic axis, which is identical to the Cartesian Y and has no X component. Once the X and Y components of each vector has been identified, we will just add the components together. If this sounds complicated, don't worry – you will only have to copy down numbers and add them together. An example should make this clear.

An Example

Richard wants to tell a story about talking rabbits. The story focuses on the rabbits but grand things happen to them. He ends the quiz with values: A = 9, C = 2, D = 4. The results appear to lean toward authorial narration, but to plot a position within the typology, Richard converts his values using Table 1 and adds the X and Y values he obtains together as show in Table 2.

Authorial Axis				Character Axis				Dramatic Axis		
A	X	Y		C	X	Y		D	X	Y
12	10.4	6.0		12	-10.4	6.0		8	0.0	8.0
11	9.5	5.5		11	-9.5	5.5		7	0.0	7.0
10	8.7	5.0		10	-8.7	5.0		6	0.0	6.0
9	7.8	4.5		9	-7.8	4.5		5	0.0	5.0
8	6.9	4.0		8	-6.9	4.0		4	0.0	4.0
7	6.1	3.5		7	-6.1	3.5		3	0.0	3.0
6	5.2	3.0		6	-5.2	3.0		2	0.0	2.0
5	4.3	2.5		5	-4.3	2.5		1	0.0	1.0
4	3.5	2.0		4	-3.5	2.0		0	0.0	0.0
3	2.6	1.5		3	-2.6	1.5		-1	0.0	-1.0
2	1.7	1.0		2	-1.7	1.0		-2	0.0	-2.0
1	0.9	0.5		1	-0.9	0.5		-3	0.0	-3.0
0	0.0	0.0		0	0.0	0.0		-4	0.0	-4.0
-1	-0.9	-0.5		-1	0.9	-0.5		-5	0.0	-5.0
-2	-1.7	-1.0		-2	1.7	-1.0		-6	0.0	-6.0
-3	-2.6	-1.5		-3	2.6	-1.5		-7	0.0	-7.0
-4	-3.5	-2.0		-4	3.5	-2.0		-8	0.0	-8.0

Table 1: Polar to Cartesian Coordinate Conversion Guide

By simply adding the three X and Y components together you can obtain an X,Y coordinate locating you within Stanzel's typology. You can plot that on the graph paper

supplied as Figure 1. It may fall outside the blue circle, which is only drawn for reference. Since Stanzel's discussion is never quantified, your precise values are less important than simply knowing which sextant your results fall in.

	Score	X	Y
A	9	7.8	4.5
C	2	-1.7	1.0
D	4	0.0	4.0
Sum		6.1	9.5

Table 2: Richard's Results

Richard's results land him in the upper right sextant, near to the Authorial pole. Indeed, *Watership Down* was written as an Authorial narrative. Try taking the quiz again for some of your favorite books. Do your results agree with the author's choice?

As the web site *narrative.mathcs.wilkes.edu* is developed, it will eventually begin recommending well-known books that fall near your results – books you can look at as models for your own writing.

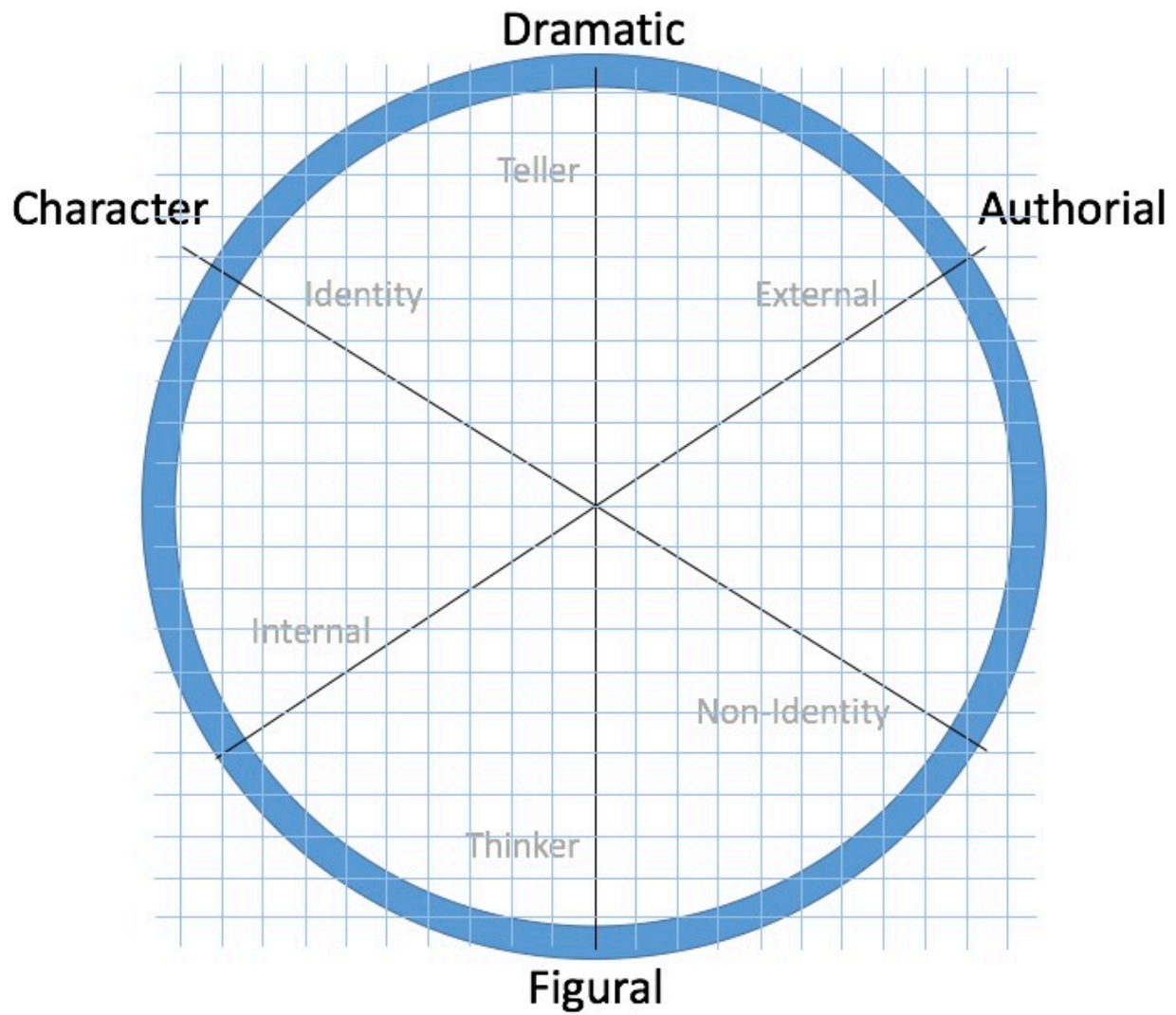Remember that a good writer is not limited by the guidelines I used to produce this quiz – but understanding the strengths and weaknesses of each narrative type is important when making that choice.

Figure 1: Typology Graph Paper