

## "Character Point of View and Text Recall"

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### Abstract

Two experiments were designed to show that subject's memory for a story depended on which character's point of view he took at the beginning of the passage. The point of view was expected to influence the meaning of the text in three specific ways. First, the reader should use the character's point of view to interpret ambiguous elements of the story. Second, the inferences drawn by the reader are directed by his idea of the character. Third, the reader's perspective affects the salience of particular facts of the text, thus affecting what he considers important and remembers. These predictions were supported by recall and recognition memory tests.

### Summary

Two experiments explored the way readers use the point of view of a character in a story to guide their comprehension. Brief stories were written so that the meaning of the main body of the text might depend on which of two short introductory paragraphs preceded it. Each opening paragraph conveyed a familiar character stereotype with a distinct goal and spatial perspective. For example, for one story, some subjects read an opening description of an athlete who was trying to run 10 miles in under an hour; other subjects first read about a man who leaves a party in a sports car to go get beer for his guests. It was predicted that subjects would adopt the point of view suggested by the opening paragraph and that this would bias their memory of the text in specific ways to be noted. Twelve sentences in each story were pinpointed as potential sites where perspective influences were likely. Sixteen college students read and then recalled the stories after a 30 minute delay. Each subject's protocol yielded many distortions and selective recalls according to his point of view, supporting our theory. First, the character's point of view affected the reader's interpretation of ambiguous elements of the text. For example, the text describes the focal character as thinking about his goal; subjects disambiguate this as particular thoughts related to running or getting the beer. Second, the reader used his knowledge of the character to direct the inferencing process--it told him how to read between the lines. For example, the subject reads that the main character didn't think he could go any faster. Subjects reading from the runner's

point of view inferred the athlete was getting tired, whereas the other subjects interpreted this to mean the driver as going at the speed limit. Third, the character's perspective determined the salience of particular facts for the reader, thus affecting what he was likely to remember. Reader's who took the perspective of the runner and his goal as they read the story recalled that he glanced at his watch during his run. However, since time was not critical to the driver, this fact was not well remembered by subjects reading from the driver's view point.

For Experiment II, a recognition test was constructed using the recall distortions from Experiment I as lures. Thirty college students read the stories, then 30 minutes later rated on a 6-point scale how sure they were that the test sentences had been presented in the stories. Subjects were confident they had read the paraphrases of ambiguous statements and spatial and motivational inferences that were congruent with the viewpoint they had adopted, whereas they were likely to reject statements paraphrased according to the other character's perspective. The subject's recognition rate for an actual statement of the story reflected its saliency from his point of view.

We conclude that a complete representation of the meaning of a text requires reference to the active process of comprehension which guides inferencing, disambiguation, and the focus of attention. The mechanism responsible for such effects in the present experiment is the reader's identification with a character's point of view. We may analyze the point of view the reader adopts during comprehension into two parts. One part comprises common knowledge which a narrator presupposes his reader has.

For example, in the present experiment, the narrator assumes that the reader knows what a jogger typically wears, what the experience of running is like, and what motivates joggers to endure physical discomfort. This knowledge is called forth from memory by a key word in the text. It then comprises the reader's world knowledge used to begin understanding the story. As he progresses through the text, the reader is able to construct a spatial perspective and flesh out his knowledge of the character he's identified with. The reader is told the goals of this particular runner, the scenery and obstacles on the road, the things that happen to him. This enables the reader to construct a more complete model of this character, enabling him to interpret and expand upon the meaning of text statements. By identifying with this character, the reader seems to filter incoming information and elaborate it according to this perspective.

After understanding the story from a specific perspective, subjects tend strongly to use that organization to later remember the story. Point of view influences recall insofar as subjects made grammatical transformations placing the focus of the recalled sentence on the character whose perspective they had taken. For example, one statement in the story was "The sports car raced past the runner leaving a cloud of exhaust." A typical recall of a subject who read from the runner's perspective would be "The car came up from behind and raced past the runner, blowing exhaust into the runner's face." Subjects reading from the driver's point of view were likely to recall "The car approached the runner and raced past, leaving him in a cloud of exhaust."

Processing a narrative according to a character's perspective is a powerful way to organize it. The process generalizes beyond story-reading since people routinely filter their interpretations of the world through their own viewpoint.