Third-person objective rewrites force students to confine the narration to the action only. (Raymond Carver deploys third-person objective point of view to chilling effect in “Popular Mechanics.”) The biggest challenge is to rewrite the story in the second person, which provides an opportunity to discuss the difficulties posed by this point of view. (See “Videotape” by Don DeLillo for a fine example of a second-person narrator: “You know about families and their video cameras,” DeLillo’s narrator explains.)

For English majors, I follow this exercise with a paper assignment that asks them to assess the contribution of point of view to the theme of a given work of fiction. If you’d like to offer your class an extended opportunity to explore the ways in which writers deploy point of view, consider pairing Joyce Carol Oates’s 1972 rewrite of Anton Chekhov’s 1899 short story “The Lady with the Pet Dog” with Chekhov’s original. Both authors employ third-person limited point of view. Chekhov uses the male protagonist as the focal character; Oates uses the female protagonist.

**Flip the Script**

*Stephen M. Park*

An exercise that teaches point of view through creative rewriting.

- **Genre:** fiction
- **Course Level:** any
- **Student Difficulty:** easy or moderate
- **Teacher Preparation:** low
- **Class Size:** small to medium
- **Semester Time:** any
- **Writing Component:** in class, optional after class
- **Close Reading:** medium
- **Estimated Time:** 50 to 60 minutes

**EXERCISE**

Choose a passage from the novel or short story your students are reading and ask them to review it before coming to class. The passage should be a page or two in length, though slightly longer passages can work for take-home versions of the exercise. Stories told in the third person work well: Charles

At the start of class, project the passage on the board and ask students to discuss the point of view from which the passage or story is told. Who gets to tell the story, and why?

Now, it’s the students’ job to “flip” things around and look at the same story from another angle. Organize the class into small groups and tell them to rewrite the passage from the point of view of another character in the story. Give them at least fifteen minutes both to choose a character and to start writing, though this part of the exercise could easily run longer. When they’ve had enough time, have each group (1) identify the character whose point of view they chose (and why they chose him or her), (2) explain how the shift in point of view changes the understanding of the passage, and (3) read a little bit of what they wrote. (As a variation, you can also assign each group a specific character into whose point of view you would like them to rewrite the passage, or even assign the same character to all the groups.)

During the presentations (allow five to seven minutes per group), you may find that some groups struggle with the second task: although they have rewritten the passage in a provocative way, they are not able to articulate fully the significance of the changes they have made. If that happens, encourage the other groups to offer suggestions, or step in to point out how important the change is (“Rewriting the passage from *Benito Cereno* from Babo’s perspective really makes clear how naive Melville’s original narrator is”). Be sure to ask the students to reflect on why the author has made the narrative choices that appear in the original text in the first place (“Why has Melville constructed a narrator who misinterprets his surroundings while still allowing the reader enough information to come to other conclusions?”). The larger question to keep students thinking about during this exercise is this: if the reader of the original text were deprived of the narrative perspective that they have just rewritten, what is lost and what is gained?

This exercise can also work well if you invite students to insert characters from other novels or stories you’ve read in the course. For instance, if Stephen Crane’s Maggie suddenly landed in the middle of Henry James’s *Daisy Miller: A Study*, how might she describe the experiences of this other young American woman? In more-advanced courses, you might ask students to insert a literary theorist or historical figure as a character in the story and narrate from that point of view. How would Karl Marx narrate the visit to the flax mill in Gustave Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*? How would Simone de Beauvoir narrate the opening pages of Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*? There really are no limits to how you might have your students reimagine a piece of fiction.
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REFLECTIONS

“Flip the Script” allows students to approach a text in new ways, think about reading as an imaginative act, and study the formal element of point of view. By rewriting a story from the perspective of a minor character, or by shifting the perspective from third to first person, students become more aware of the author’s original narrative choices and the reasons behind them. This exercise is similar in approach to “Understanding Point of View” (see the preceding exercise) but allows for more creative latitude, works best with comparatively longer passages, and provides the option of working across literary texts.

In my Introduction to Literature class, students experimented with Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s first-person short story “The Yellow Wallpaper” by rewriting the beginning using a third-person narrator. Whereas Gilman’s original narrator observes of her husband, “John laughs at me, of course, but one expects that in marriage,” without providing further details, I asked my students to imagine the scene more fully. What is John’s laugh like? Is it a hearty laugh, a nervous laugh, or perhaps a condescending one? What was actually said between the characters? In their rewrites, students drew on different clichés of patriarchal husbands, and by discussing such attitudes and behaviors, they were able to understand more fully the meaning behind Gilman’s phrase “one expects that in marriage.” We then spent more time thinking about the narrative choices in Gilman’s original text and the ultimate effect of leaving such scenes out. My students noticed how the narrator’s presumption that such scenes go without saying tells us something about her worldview, thus adding to the richness of Gilman’s first-person narrative.

Inviting in the students’ creativity can also serve as an opportunity to challenge the text you are reading. Looking at a story from the point of view of a minor character or an invented one enables students to explore the gaps in the text and consider how presumptions about gender, race, or class have shaped the way the story has been told. When reading Sherman Alexie’s Flight, for example, my students often notice how the novel’s adolescent male narrator voices a number of patriarchal attitudes, especially in his descriptions of women. So when asking students to flip the script on this novel, I encourage them to rewrite a passage from the point of view of one of the stronger female characters we’ve seen in other texts, such as Paula Gunn Allen’s “Deer Woman” or Leslie Marmon Silko’s “Yellow Woman.” The result is a variety of new stories that leads to a great discussion of Alexie’s novel. For instance, Allen’s “Deer Woman” (itself a rewrite of a folktale) tells the story of two women who lure two sexist male characters away, not to their deaths but rather toward a chance for a renewed appreciation of strong Native American women. So, in writing a scene in which Allen’s characters present Alexie’s narrator with the same option to change, the question emerges: would he?
This scenario has generated all sorts of student rewrites, ranging from an unrepentant narrator who fixates on the women’s bodies to a more enlightened narrator who ends up chastising a fictionalized Sherman Alexie for the descriptions of women in his novel. These speculations about what the narrator would do always divide the class, and our conversation naturally moves from their creative rewrites to an analytical debate regarding Alexie’s novel and the complexity of his characters, during which I make sure that the students support their claims about the narrator with evidence from *Flight*. To wrap up the class, I stress that just as Allen as a writer inserts resistant characters into her story, students as imaginative readers can challenge texts in similar ways.

This is an exercise that brings everyone into the conversation. Since it gets away from traditional modes of literary analysis, students can speak up in class without having to worry whether their insights into the story are “correct.” Their rewrites themselves constitute creative critical acts, allowing students to make interpretive statements about the text by thinking about the author’s narrative choices and by considering which perspectives are absent from the story. What’s more, these rewrites can create some hilarious and memorable moments when they’re read aloud, which may be why my students often refer to what they learned in this exercise months later.

In a follow-up to “Flip the Script,” I have sometimes asked students to continue writing at home, further embellishing their rewrite of the story. Or I have had them write a short critical reflection that explains what their group’s rewrite reveals about the original text or the technique of novel writing. In any case, this act of rethinking a text’s narrative point of view helps students become more imaginative and resistant readers of fiction.

I would like to thank Gretel Vera-Rosas for developing this lesson with me in a class we taught together.

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**First Paragraphs**

*Abigail Burnham Bloom*

A first-day exercise in which the texts introduce themselves to your students.

- **Genre:** fiction
- **Course Level:** any
- **Student Difficulty:** easy
- **Teacher Preparation:** low

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