

Some Types of Discourse (Speech, spoken or thought) in Narrative

Here are some typical ways that writers of prose narrative vary how they present characters' speech, both spoken and thought. Some authors, of course, favor one type almost entirely. Varying the discourse can allow you to move closer or farther from a character— that is, to have more or less perspective. Some types of discourse work best for a character musing in solitude, others for fully developed scenes. Some types tend to move faster, and are thus efficient and appropriate for summarizing or action, while others are more useful for expressing strong emotion. The point is to be able to use what you need.

1. Narratized or summarized discourse

The narrator summarizes what a character says in the course of the narration—it does not use the character's own words or thoughts. This is usually the quickest, most efficient, and least expressive way to do it: Oedipus was terribly distraught because he killed his father.

2. Tagged direct discourse or reported discourse

The narrator quotes the character's words said aloud using quotation marks. This moves the narration toward dramatic form, with something like stage instructions and often several people included in the scene: Oedipus paced back and forth. Suddenly he struck his own chest with his fist and turned to the Chorus. He cried out, "I've murdered my own father! Could anything be worse?"

3. Indirect discourse, especially "tagged" indirect discourse

The narrator tells what the character said within a sentence of narrative, giving at least a hint of how the character said or thought it, thus becoming a little more expressive: Oedipus shouted that he had killed his father. A trivial grammatical variation would be Oedipus shouted he had killed his father.

4. Free indirect discourse

The narrator tells what the character said or thought within the narrative sentence, and includes even more of the character's expression and exact words— still without quotation marks, however. This is usually a mix of the character's words and the narrator's words: Oedipus was beginning to realize what he had done: It was murder! He had done the unthinkable and killed his own father. (Here "It was murder!" would be Oedipus's own words).

5. Free direct discourse

Here, the narrator gives the character's own words at more length, presumably exactly what the character would say or think (but still without quotation marks): Oedipus paced back and forth as the realization hit him. I've murdered my own father! Could anything possibly be worse? But wait, what about the rest of the prophecy? What if....? Gradually he realized that indeed something could be worse. (If this goes on long enough, it would be called internal monologue).