



WriterLink.org

PSYCHIC DISTANCE EXERCISE

'Psychic distance' is a concept discussed by John Gardner in his book, 'The Art of Fiction.' It defines where the narrative (and therefore the reader) stands, relative to a character. Sometimes it's called narrative distance.

If the 'psychic distance' is very close then we feel inside the character's head, the story narration is most likely told from the point of view of the character.

If the 'psychic distance' is further the narrative is more objective and distant.

Here are some examples from Gardner. You'll notice that number 1 is an objective and distant narration, while 5 is up close and personal.

1. It was winter of the year 1853. A large man stepped out of a doorway.
2. Henry J. Warburton had never much cared for snowstorms.
3. Henry hated snowstorms.
4. God how he hated these damn snowstorms.
5. Snow. Under your collar, down inside your shoes, freezing and plugging up your miserable soul

Ask your group to try an exercise to explore psychic distance.

Think of a character in a simple situation. You can let writers come up with this themselves, or suggest something to write about. Perhaps a man is waiting at a bus stop when he is accosted by someone asking for money?

Write the scene in these three ways.

1. Describe the scene with a remote and objective style.
2. Colour the voice of the narrator with some of the vocabulary and point of view of the character.
3. Write the scene with tight, up-close psychic distance, almost a brain download. This is a stream of consciousness style of writing.

Discuss the writer's learnings about psychic distance. Did the writers have a preference for close or distant narration? What are the pros and cons of each style?