

The Tell-Tale Heart

Based on the short story by Edgar Allan Poe

What makes you SUSPICIOUS?

Have you ever had the feeling that you couldn't trust someone or something? The feeling you had is called **suspicion** (suh SPISH uhn). In this story, the narrator's suspicion causes him to commit a horrible crime.

TURN AND TALK Think about a person, animal, or event that would make you suspicious. For example, someone wearing a ski mask in a bank would probably make you suspicious. Then, discuss the reasons for your choice with a partner.

Text Analysis: Suspense

When you can't wait to find out what happens next in a story or movie, you're feeling **suspense**. The chart below shows three ways that Edgar Allan Poe creates suspense in "The Tell-Tale Heart."

Poe Creates Suspense With ...	Examples
Descriptions of a Character's Fear	"True! I had been very, very nervous, and I still am."
Descriptions of Sights or Sounds	"Then, I heard a stifled groan of terror."
Repeated Words, Phrases, or Actions	"Now, I have told you that I am not mad."

What would make me suspicious?

1. Man wearing a ski mask in a bank

2. Answers will vary.

3. _____

Why?

1. He may plan to rob the bank

2. Answers will vary.

3. _____

Reading Skill: Evaluate Narrator

The voice that tells a story is called the **narrator**. Sometimes you can't trust everything the narrator tells you, especially if that narrator is a character in the story being told. To **evaluate**, or judge, how much you can trust a narrator, think about his or her actions, thoughts, and statements. The chart below shows one way to evaluate a narrator.

EVALUATE NARRATOR	
Makes Me Trust Him	Makes Me Not Trust Him
"Notice how calmly I can tell you the whole story."	"So I decided to kill him and get rid of the eye forever."

Vocabulary in Context

Note: Words are listed in the order in which they appear in the story.

Acute (uh KYOOT) is an adjective that means *sharp*.

My hearing was so **acute** that I could hear him breathing.

Stifled (STY fuhld) is an adjective that means *held back* or *made quiet*.

The **stifled** groan made me think he was trying to be quiet.

Hypocritical (hip uh KRIT ih kuhl) is an adjective that means *false* or *pretending*.

The officers' **hypocritical** smiles showed that they were pretending not to hear the heart beating.

Vocabulary Practice

Review the words and sample sentences above. Then, with a partner, discuss how you could complete each sentence.

Answers will vary. See samples below.

1. An eagle's vision must be very **acute** because it has to hunt small animals

from high above them.

2. The **stifled** coughs during the concert made me think people were trying to keep quiet.

3. Their friendly smiles were **hypocritical** because they really did not

like him.

**SET A PURPOSE
FOR READING**

The narrator makes a careful plan to kill an old man. Read “The Tell-Tale Heart” to find out whether the narrator is sane or crazy.

The Tell-Tale Heart



Based on the short story by
EDGAR ALLAN POE

BACKGROUND In this story, the narrator tries very hard to convince the reader that he isn't insane. As you read about the narrator's careful plans and actions, think about the state of his mental health.

VOCABULARY

The word **acute** (uh KYOOT) is an adjective that means *sharp*.

Underline the sentence that helps you understand the meaning of *acute*.

A SUSPENSE

Reread lines 6–12. Then, circle the repeated word that Poe uses to create **suspense**.

True! I had been very, very nervous, and I still am. But why do you call me insane? The disease had improved my senses. My sense of hearing became especially **acute**. I heard everything in heaven and earth—and even in hell. Notice how calmly I can tell you the whole story.

I cannot say how I came up with the idea, but once I had thought of it, I could think of nothing else. I was not angry. I loved the old man. He had never hurt me. I didn't want his gold. It was his **eye**! One of his eyes looked like a vulture's. It was a pale blue **eye** with a film¹ over it. His glance made my blood run cold. So I decided to kill him and get rid of the **eye** forever. **A**

1. **film**: a thin coating.

IN OTHER WORDS The narrator tells about an idea he had to kill an old man who lived with him. He decides to kill the old man because he can't stand the look of one of the man's eyes.

Now this is the point. You think I am crazy. But you should have seen how carefully I made plans! I hid my feelings well. Shortly before I killed the old man, I was kinder to him than I had ever been.

About midnight every night for a week, I turned the doorknob—oh, so gently! Then, I made an opening for my head. In the opening, I put a lantern with the light covered. Next, I stuck my head through the opening. I moved very, very slowly so as not to wake the old man.

It took me an hour to get my head where I could see him. Ha! Would a madman have been as wise as this? Then, I carefully opened the lantern cover so I could see the vulture eye. But every night, the eye was closed. I could not kill him until I saw his Evil Eye.

Every morning, I asked how he had slept. So you see, he would have had to be a smart man to suspect me.

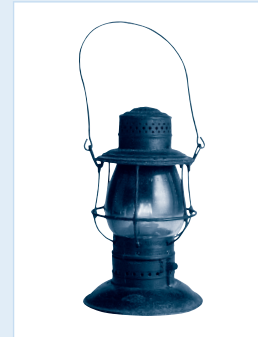
IN OTHER WORDS The narrator says his careful plans show that he isn't crazy.

► With a partner, discuss what the narrator does every night.

Students should discuss how the narrator opens the man's door wide enough to stick his head through so he can see the man's eye with a lantern.

On the eighth night, I was so still that a watch's minute hand moves faster than my hand. Before this moment, I had never felt how powerful and wise I was. As I slowly opened the door, the old man moved on the bed suddenly, as if he had been surprised.

Now, you may think that I drew back, but I knew that he could not see the door opening in the dark. Finally, I



VISUAL VOCABULARY

A lantern is a case that contains a light source, such as a candle or oil-burning lamp. It protects the light source from wind and weather. The lantern usually has a handle so it can be carried by hand.

B LANGUAGE COACH

In line 23, the narrator asks the reader a rhetorical question. A rhetorical question is asked only to make a point. No answer is expected. In this case, the narrator is trying to make the point that he is not mad.

VOCABULARY

The word **stifled** (STY fuhld) is an adjective that means *held back or made quiet*.

SUSPENSE

Reread lines 49–53. Then, fill in the chart with an example of how Poe creates suspense.

SUSPENSE**Descriptions of Sights or Sounds**

Possible answer: The narrator equates a low, dull, quick sound with the beating of the old man's heart.

EVALUATE NARRATOR

Reread lines 54–62. Underline sentences that help you decide whether you can trust the narrator. Then, with a partner, discuss why you should or should not trust him.

Students should observe that it's unlikely anyone could hear the heartbeat and crazy to think that a neighbor might. Therefore, the narrator is probably mentally unbalanced and they should not trust him.

had my head in. My thumb slipped on the lantern. The old man cried out, “Who’s there?”

I kept still for a whole hour. During that time the old man sat up in bed, listening. Then, I heard a **stifled** groan
40 of terror. I pitied the old man, but my heart chuckled.

I knew that he had been lying awake since the first noise. He had been growing more and more afraid. But there was no escape. The presence of Death made him feel my head in the room.

I waited for a long time, very patiently. Then I let out a thin ray of light from the lantern, which landed directly on the old man’s vulture eye. It was wide open.

IN OTHER WORDS One night, the old man wakes up when the narrator opens his bedroom door. The narrator waits quietly and then shines his light at the old man’s opened eye.

Now, I have told you that I am not mad. Rather, my senses are too sharp. So I began to hear a low, dull, quick
50 sound, like a watch wrapped in cotton. I knew that sound too well. It was the beating of the old man’s heart. It made me even angrier, the way a drumbeat makes a soldier braver. **C**

I held the light on the eye, but the sound of the heart grew quicker and louder. He must have been terrified! The noise terrified me, too. I thought the heart would burst. And now I became afraid that a neighbor might hear the sound.

With a loud yell, I leaped into the bedroom. The old
60 man shrieked only once. In an instant, I dragged him to the floor and pulled the heavy bed over him. Then, I smiled because the deed was nearly done. **D**

But, for a while, the heart beat on. Finally, it stopped. The old man was dead. I held my hand over his heart for



many minutes but felt no heartbeat. He was stone dead. His eye would trouble me no more.

IN OTHER WORDS The narrator says he could hear the old man’s heart beating.

► Reread lines 59–66. Draw brackets [] around the sentence that tells how he kills the old man.

Do you still think I am mad? Consider how I hid the body. First, I cut up the corpse. Next, I took up three boards from the bedroom floor and hid the body parts
70 there. There were no bloodstains. I had caught all the blood in a tub. When I finished it was four o’clock in the morning, still dark as midnight. I answered a knock at the door with nothing to fear. **E**

Three police officers entered. The officers had come because a neighbor had reported a shriek in the night.

I smiled. What did I have to fear? I said I had shrieked from a dream. Saying the old man was away, I let them search the house. Then, I led them to his bedroom and brought chairs. I wanted them to rest here. I put my own
80 chair over the place where I’d hidden the old man.

IN OTHER WORDS The narrator tells how he cut up the old man’s body and hid the body parts under the bedroom floor. Three police officers come to the door because a neighbor heard a scream. The narrator isn’t worried, so he takes the police to the old man’s bedroom.

I had convinced the officers. We all chatted happily, but soon, I felt myself grow pale. My head ached, and my ears seemed to ring. I kept talking, but the feelings grew worse. Soon, I realized that the noise was not within my ears. **PAUSE & REFLECT**

E EVALUATE NARRATOR

The narrator continues to insist that he is not crazy. Reread lines 67–73. Decide whether you trust or don’t trust the narrator. Then, circle either *Trust* or *Don’t Trust* in the chart below. Fill in the chart with an example that supports your choice.

EVALUATE NARRATOR	
Trust / (Don’t Trust)	
	<i>Possible answer: He cuts up the body and hides the body parts under the bedroom floor.</i>

PAUSE & REFLECT

In lines 81–85, the narrator’s mood suddenly changes. With a partner, discuss what might be causing this change in the narrator.

Students should recognize that guilt, fear, and/or madness is causing this change in the narrator.

I am sure that I now grew very pale. I talked faster and louder, but the sound became louder. It was *a low, dull, quick sound, like a watch wrapped in cotton*. I gasped for breath. But the officers did not hear the noise. I talked
90 faster; the noise grew.

I stood up and paced the floor, waving my arms as I argued about nothing. But the noise steadily grew. Why would they not leave? What could I do? I dragged my chair over the floorboards, but the noise arose over all and grew louder and louder and louder!

Still the officers chatted and smiled. Was it possible they could not hear it? No, no! They heard! They suspected! They knew! They were making a cruel joke of my horror! Anything was better than their **hypocritical** smiles. I could
100 bear it no more. I felt I must scream or die! And now! Again—listen! louder! louder! louder! **F**

“Villains!” I shrieked. “Pretend no more! I admit the deed! Tear up the floor boards! Here! Here! It is the beating of his horrible heart!”

VOCABULARY

The word **hypocritical** (hip uh KRIT ih kuh!) is an adjective that means *false or pretending*.

F SUSPENSE

Reread lines 91–101. With a partner, discuss the ways Poe builds suspense up to the end of the story.

Students should recognize that Poe’s use of short sentences and phrases—often with words followed by exclamation points—mimics the sounds of the dead man’s heartbeat and helps the reader feel the narrator’s rising panic.

IN OTHER WORDS At first the narrator thinks he has convinced the police. But then he begins to feel sick, and he thinks he hears something. Finally, he tells the police what he has done.

► With a partner, discuss what happens to the narrator.

Students should realize that the narrator is growing increasingly mad and believes that he can still hear the dead man’s heartbeat. The narrator also believes that the officers suspect him, and he confesses to the crime.

Text Analysis: Suspense

“The Tell-Tale Heart” is full of **suspense**. Edgar Allan Poe describes the fear of both the narrator and the old man so clearly that you can almost feel it yourself. He also describes specific sights and sounds that give the story an especially creepy feeling. Finally, Poe repeats words and actions to keep the reader asking, “What happens next?” Look back at any notes you made as you read the story. Then, fill in the chart below with more examples of how Poe creates suspense.

For this chart, answers will vary. See samples below.

SUSPENSE		
Descriptions of a Character’s Fear	Descriptions of Sights or Sounds	Repeated Words, Phrases, or Actions
<i>“True! I had been very, very nervous, and I still am.”</i>	<i>“Then, I heard a stifled groan of terror.”</i>	<i>“Now, I have told you that I am not mad.”</i>
<i>“The noise terrified me, too. I thought the heart would burst. And now I became afraid that a neighbor might hear the sound.”</i>	<i>“I began to hear a low, dull, quick sound, like a watch wrapped in cotton. I knew that sound too well. It was the beating of the old man’s heart.”</i>	<i>“... the noise grew.” “... the noise arose over all and grew louder and louder and louder!”</i>

Now think of another story or movie that is full of suspense. On the lines below, write a short description of how the writer or movie director created that suspense.

Answers will vary.

What makes you SUSPICIOUS?

At the end of the story, the narrator becomes suspicious of the police officers. What made you suspicious of the narrator as you read the story?

Possible answer: The narrator kept saying that he wasn't mad. He repeated himself constantly and interrupted his own thoughts. I also did not trust his sudden outbursts, his fixation on the eye as if it were a separate living being, and the fact that he thinks he hears the dead man's heartbeat and actually worries that the neighbor might hear it.

Reading Skill: Evaluate Narrator

As you read the "Tell-Tale Heart," you probably started doubting the narrator's sanity. Look back at any notes you made. Then, write down examples of why you did or did not trust the narrator.

For this chart, answers will vary. See samples below.

EVALUATE NARRATOR	
Made Me Trust Him	Made Me Not Trust Him
"Notice how calmly I can tell you the whole story."	"But why do you call me insane?"
	"His glance made my blood run cold."
	"I could not kill him until I saw his Evil Eye."

Vocabulary Practice

Circle the part of each sentence that answers the question.

1. Would a person with **acute** vision have very good eyesight or poor eyesight?
2. Would a **stifled** laugh most likely be loud or quiet?
3. Would a **hypocritical** friend be a true friend or someone pretending to be your friend?

Academic Vocabulary in Speaking

The word **evident** (EV ih duhnt) is an adjective that means *easy to see or understand*.

As the sky cleared up and the sun came out, it became **evident** that we would have a nice day for the picnic.

TURN AND TALK With a partner, talk about the clues that make it **evident** that the narrator of “The Tell-Tale Heart” is insane. Be sure to use the word **evident** in your discussion.

Encourage students to use the Academic Vocabulary word in their discussions.

Assessment Practice

DIRECTIONS Use “The Tell-Tale Heart” to answer questions 1–6.

- The narrator wants the reader to think —
 - he has a hearing problem
 - he is perfectly normal
 - he is afraid of the old man
 - he is insane
- What is the narrator’s reason for wanting to kill the old man?
 - He wants the old man’s gold.
 - He hates the old man.
 - He wants to get rid of the old man’s eye.
 - He wants to stop the loud beating of the old man’s heart.
- How does this sentence create suspense:
The old man cried out, “Who’s there?”
 - It shows a character’s fear.
 - It describes a sight.
 - It repeats an important word or phrase.
 - It repeats an action.
- Which sentence from the story helps create suspense?
 - The disease had improved my senses.*
 - But you should have seen how carefully I made plans!*
 - Every morning, I asked how he had slept.*
 - Then, I smiled because the deed was nearly done.*
- After killing the old man, the narrator —
 - goes insane
 - hides the body parts under the bedroom floor
 - calls the police to report a scream
 - tells the police that a neighbor killed the old man
- The narrator admits to the crime because —
 - he thinks the police can hear the heart beating
 - a neighbor tells the police that he did it
 - he is sorry for killing the old man
 - the police have already decided to arrest him