

A Rice Sandwich by Sandra Cisneros

This selection also appears in *Elements of Literature*.

LITERARY FOCUS: THE NARRATOR

A **narrator** is the teller of a story. When you begin reading a story, look for clues about who the narrator is. A narrator who observes the action and is not a story character is called an **omniscient** (äm-nish'ənt) **narrator**. This type of narrator can tell you about the thoughts and feelings of all the story characters.

A **first-person narrator**, on the other hand, *is* a story character. A first-person narrator participates directly in the story's action. If the storyteller tells the whole tale using first-person pronouns such as *I*, *me*, and *mine*, then you know that you're reading a story told by a first-person narrator.

Identify the type of narrator in each of these passages.

Passage	Narrator
"I am not diving off this cliff," I said as we approached the top. Then I saw all the kids lined up to jump, and I gathered my courage.	Omniscient <input type="checkbox"/> First Person <input type="checkbox"/>
The math test was extremely hard. Roz began to wish she had studied. Cora got stuck on item 3 and couldn't finish.	Omniscient <input type="checkbox"/> First Person <input type="checkbox"/>

READING SKILLS: MAKING INFERENCES

Stories told by a first-person narrator usually give you a lot of information about the character who is narrating the story. However, it is still important for you to take part in the story by making your own inferences, educated guesses, about the characters. Use these tips to make inferences about Esperanza, the narrator of "A Rice Sandwich."

- Pay close attention to what Esperanza says and does.
- Observe the way other characters respond to Esperanza.
- Examine what you learn about Esperanza's thoughts.
- Think about how Esperanza is like, or not like, people you know.

SKILLS FOCUS

Literary Skills
Understand the narrator.

Reading Skills
Make inferences.

A Rice Sandwich

Sandra Cisneros



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WORD STUDY

A canteen (line 2) is a place where food or drink can be obtained. *Canteen* comes from the French *cantine* and the Italian *cantina*, both of which mean “wine cellar” or “vault.”

IDENTIFY

Re-read lines 1–9. Underline the clues that hint at who the **narrator** is. Describe what you know about the narrator so far.

The special kids, the ones who wear keys around their necks, get to eat in the canteen. The canteen! Even the name sounds important. And these kids at lunch time go there because their mothers aren’t home or home is too far away to get to.

My home isn’t far but it’s not close either, and somehow I got it in my head one day to ask my mother to make me a sandwich and write a note to the principal so I could eat in the canteen too.

10 Oh no, she says pointing the butter knife at me as if I’m starting trouble, no sir. Next thing you know everybody will be wanting a bag lunch—I’ll be up all night cutting bread into little triangles, this one with mayonnaise, this one with mustard, no pickles on mine, but mustard on one side please. You kids just like to invent more work for me.

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20 But Nenny says she doesn't want to eat at school—
ever—because she likes to go home with her best friend
Gloria who lives across the schoolyard. Gloria's mama has
a big color T.V. and all they do is watch cartoons. Kiki and
Carlos, on the other hand, are patrol boys. They don't want
to eat at school either. They like to stand out in the cold
especially if it's raining. They think suffering is good for
you ever since they saw that movie "300 Spartans."

I'm no Spartan¹ and hold up an anemic² wrist to prove
it. I can't even blow up a balloon without getting dizzy. And
besides, I know how to make my own lunch. If I ate at
school there'd be less dishes to wash. You would see me less
and less and like me better. Every day at noon my chair
would be empty. Where is my favorite daughter you would
30 cry, and when I came home finally at 3 p.m. you would
appreciate me.

Okay, okay, my mother says after three days of this.
And the following morning I get to go to school with my
mother's letter and a rice sandwich because we don't have
lunch meat.

Mondays or Fridays, it doesn't matter, mornings always
go by slow and this day especially. But lunch time came
finally and I got to get in line with the stay-at-school kids.
Everything is fine until the nun who knows all the canteen
40 kids by heart looks at me and says: you, who sent you here?
And since I am shy, I don't say anything, just hold out my
hand with the letter. This is no good, she says, till Sister
Superior gives the okay. Go upstairs and see her. And so
I went.

I had to wait for two kids in front of me to get hollered
at, one because he did something in class, the other because
he didn't. My turn came and I stood in front of the big desk

1. **Spartan**: hardy, disciplined person, like the Spartans of ancient Greece.
2. **anemic** (ə·nē'mik) *adj.*: pale and weak.

FLUENCY

In the boxed passage of text, the writer uses a technique that allows you to "hear" what the main character is thinking. Read the paragraph aloud several times, striving for smooth delivery and a tone of voice that conveys the main character's state of mind.

CLARIFY

In this short, **first-person narrative** the author writes in present tense and does not always tell you who is speaking or to whom she is speaking. Re-read lines 24–31. Underline words or phrases that help you figure out who the writer is speaking to.

INFER

Pause at line 35. Think about what the narrator brings to lunch and why. What can you infer about the narrator from that detail?

IDENTIFY

Re-read lines 36–44. Circle the words that tell you what kind of school the writer attends.

INFER

Pause at line 56. Considering the **tone** of the letter from Esperanza's mother to Sister Superior, do you think Esperanza's mother took her request seriously? Why or why not?

WORD STUDY

Pause at line 57. *Boulevard* is a word borrowed from French. It is a noun meaning "a wide, prominent street, often tree-lined."

INFER

Esperanza gives us a reason for her crying at the end of the story (lines 65–66). What may be another reason she cries (lines 71–73)?

with holy pictures under the glass while the Sister Superior read my letter. It went like this:

50 Dear Sister Superior,
Please let Esperanza eat in the lunch room because she lives too far away and she gets tired. As you can see she is very skinny. I hope to God she does not faint.
Thanking you,
Mrs. E. Cordero.

You don't live far, she says. You live across the boulevard. That's only four blocks. Not even. Three maybe. Three long blocks away from here. I bet I can see your house from my
60 window. Which one? Come here. Which one is your house?

And then she made me stand up on a box of books and point. That one? she said pointing to a row of ugly 3-flats, the ones even the raggedy men are ashamed to go into. Yes, I nodded even though I knew that wasn't my house and started to cry. I always cry when nuns yell at me, even if they're not yelling.

Then she was sorry and said I could stay—just for today, not tomorrow or the day after—you go home. And I said yes and could I please have a Kleenex—I had to blow
70 my nose.

In the canteen, which was nothing special, lots of boys and girls watched while I cried and ate my sandwich, the bread already greasy and the rice cold.

A Rice Sandwich

Narrator Detector By now you know that “A Rice Sandwich” is narrated by the main character, Esperanza. But how did you find out? The story gives you clues in the form of first-person pronouns that Esperanza uses to refer to herself. Re-read lines 32–35 to find all four clues. Write those pronouns on the lines below. Then, tell how you learned the narrator’s name.



Literary Skills
Analyze the narrator.

Clue 1: _____

Clue 2: _____

Clue 3: _____

Clue 4: _____

Where in the story did you find the narrator’s name?

Skills Review

A Rice Sandwich

COMPREHENSION

Reading Comprehension Answer each question below.

1. Who is the narrator of "A Rice Sandwich"?

2. Which students eat in the school's canteen?

3. How does Esperanza persuade her mother to write the note so she can eat in the canteen too?

4. Does Esperanza enjoy eating in the canteen? Explain.

Page 69

INFER

Words that describe what Mrs. Moreno is thinking, what she looks like, and what she is doing include “Poor baby, she thought,” “made a sad face,” and “walked back to the living room and cried.” These details show that Mrs. Moreno is sympathetic, caring, and loving.

INTERPRET

Possible response: Her words reveal that she is hopeful, practical, imaginative.

Page 70

IDENTIFY

Ernie shows he’s a nice boy by calling Yollie to find out why she left the dance and to ask if she was mad at him. Then he asks her to go to a movie. Mrs. Moreno shows her love for Yollie by using her savings to buy her daughter some new clothes.

Possible Answers to Skills Practice

Character Traits Chart (page 71)

Answers will vary. Sample answer:

Character: Mrs. Moreno

Character Traits: funny, caring, loving

Appearance: large, wears a muumuu and butterfly-shaped glasses

Speech: “I’ve been saving a little money every month . . . For you, *m’ija*.”

Actions: She walked back to the living room and cried.

Thoughts and Feelings: She wanted to tell her daughter how sorry she was, but she knew it wouldn’t help.

Other Characters’ Reactions: Everyone thought Yollie’s mother was a riot. Even the nuns laughed at her antics.

■ Possible Answers to Skills Review

Vocabulary and Comprehension (page 72)

- A.**
1. sophisticated
 2. matinees
 3. meager
- B.**
1. Mrs. Moreno is humorous, loving, down-to-earth.
 2. Yollie doesn’t have a new dress to wear.
 3. Yollie is embarrassed because the dye is washing out of her dress, and she doesn’t want her friends to know she is wearing an old dress.
 4. Mrs. Moreno takes Yollie shopping for new clothes.

A Rice Sandwich, page 73

Page 74

IDENTIFY

Clue words that tell you who the narrator is include *My*, *I*, and *me*. The narrator is a schoolgirl who lives close to the school. The narrator is a character in the story.

Page 75

CLARIFY

Words or phrases that help you understand to whom the narrator is speaking include “Where is my favorite daughter you would cry” and “when I came home finally at 3 p.m., you would appreciate me.”

INFER

Possible response: The narrator’s family is poor.

IDENTIFY

Words that identify the kind of school the writer attends include “nun” and “Sister Superior.”

Page 76

INFER

Answers will vary. Sample response: I don’t think Esperanza’s mother took her request seriously because her note sounds insincere and almost humorous.

INFER

Possible response: She cries because she is disappointed. The canteen is not special, and Esperanza went to a lot of trouble to get to eat there.

■ Possible Answers to Skills Practice

Narrator Detector (page 77)

Clue 1: my

Clue 2: I

Clue 3: my

Clue 4: we

The narrator’s name is in the letter from her mother to Sister Superior.

■ Possible Answers to Skills Review

Comprehension (page 78)

1. Esperanza, a girl who attends a Catholic school
2. The kids who eat in the canteen live too far from school to go home, or their mothers aren’t at home during the day. Esperanza calls them “special kids.”

3. For three days, Esperanza gives her mother reasons why she should eat at school. She tells her mother there would be “less dishes to wash” and that her mother would miss her at lunch and therefore appreciate Esperanza more when she is home.
4. Esperanza doesn’t enjoy eating in the canteen. Sister Superior humiliates her and tells her she can eat in the canteen for only one day. Esperanza decides the canteen is nothing special. She cries and eats her rice sandwich while other boys and girls watch.

Learning to Float, page 79

Page 81

IDENTIFY

The narrator is a character in the story. She is visiting her grandmother in Panama.

INFER

The fruits include blueberries, bananas, and coconut. Students’ knowledge of the fruits will vary.

Possible inference: Marisol asks for blueberries, which do not grow in Panama. This suggests she has not been in Panama before.

Page 82

PREDICT

Most students will predict that Abuela will not move to America because she says to Marisol, “Why don’t you move to Panama?”

Page 83

DECODING TIP

Possible response: Vendors are people who sell products in a store, a market, or on the street.

DECODING TIP

Students should draw a line to “practice.” They should infer that *practicando* means “practicing.”

INFER

Words and phrases that reveal Marisol’s problems with speaking Spanish: “but I was still nervous about trying to use my Spanish”; “At home people make fun of my Spanish.” Students’ feelings will vary.

Page 84

PREDICT

Responses will vary. Some students may say Marisol will have a good day because she has started to speak Spanish and feels more confident. Others may say that because Marisol is shy, she will have some difficulties.

Page 85

DECODING TIP

Familiar English word parts include *No* and *pre-*. The sentence means “Don’t you worry.” *Preoccupied* in English means “totally absorbed in one’s thoughts.”

Page 86

DECODING TIP

Context clues include “You look great” and “stylish.” Students should figure out that the phrase means “It’s the fashion.” *Mode* in English means “fashion” or “style.”

DECODING TIP

The context clue is “New” (line 133). *Nueva* means “new.”

DECODING TIP

Students should underline *signif* in *significa*. The context clue is “It means.” Students should recognize that the sentence in line 141 means “What does *as if* signify?” or “What is the meaning of *as if*?”

Page 87

PREDICT

Predictions will vary. Possible prediction: Ana and Marisol will become friends because they’re both talking about starting the school year alone.

INFER

The allusion is to *The Wizard of Oz*. Possible inference: Marisol feels the way Dorothy felt when she landed in the strange land of Oz. Toto is Dorothy’s dog in the movie.

WORD STUDY

The translation is “How’d it go today?” *Cena* means “dinner.”

Page 88

INFER

Answers will vary. Possible inference: I think that Marisol misses her mother because she holds her mother’s book to her chest. Marisol is “hugging” her absent mother.

Page 89

INFER

Answers will vary. Possible inference: Marisol has decided to adjust to a new culture and master Spanish. She will let the language come naturally, just as she learned to let go and float in the pool.