

TOEFL Listening Lesson 24

Setting: A college-level *Literature* class.

Questions

1. What is the lecture mainly about?

- A. The history of 18th-century English literature
- B. The importance of unreliable narrators in fiction
- C. The narrative structure and impact of epistolary novels
- D. The evolution of digital communication in literature

2. What example does the professor give to illustrate multiple points of view in an epistolary novel?

- A. *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker
- B. *Where'd You Go, Bernadette* by Maria Semple
- C. *Pamela* by Samuel Richardson
- D. *Dracula* by Bram Stoker

3. What does the professor say is a common limitation of the epistolary form?

- A. It often lacks emotional depth.
- B. It can be too objective for readers to relate to.
- C. The pace may slow because events are described after they happen.
- D. It usually requires a third-person narrator.

4. Why does the professor mention *The Color Purple*?

- A. To demonstrate the use of multiple narrators in one novel
- B. To show how modern novels parody traditional epistolary forms
- C. To illustrate how the format reflects a character's personal development
- D. To highlight novels that avoid using letters altogether

5. Why does the professor say that readers of epistolary novels are “active participants”?

- A. Because they must understand multiple languages
- B. Because they often help edit and revise the story
- C. Because they are given control over how the novel ends
- D. Because they interpret fragmented and subjective accounts

Script

Professor:

Today, we're going to explore a literary form that's both historically significant and narratively unique: the epistolary novel. These are novels written as a series of documents—most commonly letters, but they can also include diary entries, newspaper clippings, or even, in modern adaptations, emails and text messages. The structure of an epistolary novel directly influences how the story is told and how readers engage with the characters.

Let's begin with a bit of history. The epistolary novel gained popularity in the 18th century. One of the earliest and most influential examples is Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*, published in 1740. The story is told entirely through letters written by a young servant girl to her parents. This form gave readers access to her private thoughts and feelings in a way that traditional third-person narration couldn't. *Pamela* wasn't just about the plot—it was about the emotional experience of the protagonist, and readers were invited to experience it in real time.

Now, why use this format? What does it offer? First, the epistolary structure creates intimacy. Because we're reading the character's personal communications, we feel as though we're being confided in. This can generate strong emotional connections between readers and characters. Second, it allows for subjectivity. Since the story is filtered through the voice of the writer, we get a deeply personal and sometimes unreliable perspective. This subjectivity can add layers of complexity to the narrative. For instance, if a character writes, "I wasn't

upset,” but their actions suggest otherwise, readers are prompted to read between the lines and question the narrator’s reliability.

Another strength of the epistolary form is its ability to show multiple points of view. Some novels alternate between letter writers, giving readers access to several perspectives on the same events. A good example is *Dracula* by Bram Stoker. The novel combines letters, journal entries, and newspaper clippings from different characters. This technique builds suspense and creates a sense of authenticity, almost like a scrapbook of evidence.

But there are also limitations. Because the story unfolds through documents, there’s always a question of how the writer of the letter knows the information they’re sharing. In other words, the author must find believable reasons for characters to write everything down. It can also slow the pacing of the novel. Letters often reflect on events rather than show them as they happen, which can affect immediacy.

Still, authors have found creative ways to work around these constraints. In *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker, for example, the protagonist Celie writes letters to God, then later to her sister. These letters reveal her growth over time and provide an emotional arc that’s powerful and moving. The language evolves along with the character, offering a vivid sense of development.

In modern literature, we’ve seen a revival of the epistolary form in digital formats. Novels like *Attachments* by Rainbow Rowell or *Where’d You Go, Bernadette* by Maria Semple use emails, transcripts, and other contemporary forms of communication to tell their stories. This not only

makes the narrative feel current but also mirrors the way we share and process information in today's world.

So, to summarize, the epistolary novel is a form that leverages personal documents to tell a story. Its strengths lie in creating intimacy, showcasing subjective perspectives, and offering multiple viewpoints. However, it also presents challenges, particularly in terms of narrative plausibility and pacing. Despite these limitations, the form continues to evolve and adapt, finding new relevance in the digital age.

Before we close, let's consider how the structure of an epistolary novel shapes your role as a reader. Because you're often piecing together fragments—sometimes contradictory fragments—you're asked to be an active participant in constructing the story. This can make reading these novels especially rewarding. You're not just observing events; you're interpreting them, questioning the narrators, and sometimes even filling in the blanks. That kind of engagement is one of the form's greatest strengths.

Answers

1. What is the lecture mainly about?

✓ **Correct Answer:** C. The narrative structure and impact of epistolary novels

2. What example does the professor give to illustrate multiple points of view in an epistolary novel?

✓ **Correct Answer:** D. *Dracula* by Bram Stoker

3. What does the professor say is a common limitation of the epistolary form?

✓ **Correct Answer:** C. The pace may slow because events are described after they happen.

4. Why does the professor mention *The Color Purple*?

✓ **Correct Answer:** C. To illustrate how the format reflects a character's personal development

5. Why does the professor say that readers of epistolary novels are “active participants”?

✓ **Correct Answer:** D. Because they interpret fragmented and subjective accounts