

# The Tell-Tale Heart

## Free Teacher Packet

Study guide • quiz • answer key • discussion prompts • teacher notes

Classroom-safe companion materials for Edgar Allan Poe's short story.

Use with the Stick to the Classics explainer video as a review, discussion starter, substitute lesson support, or before-the-quiz refresher.

Best fit: middle school, high school, homeschool, tutoring, or Gothic/suspense short story units.

## What's inside

- Student-friendly study guide
- Quiz questions
- Answer key
- Discussion and writing prompts
- Teacher use notes
- Standards alignment draft

# Study Guide

## Quick facts

- Author: Edgar Allan Poe
- Published: 1843
- Genre: Gothic short story / psychological suspense
- Narrator: Unnamed first-person narrator
- Core classroom focus: unreliable narration, guilt, obsession, suspense, and sound imagery

## Student-friendly summary

“The Tell-Tale Heart” is about an unnamed narrator who insists they are completely sane while describing a murder. The narrator becomes obsessed with an old man’s eye, carefully plans the crime, hides the body, and then tries to act normal when police arrive. But the narrator begins hearing what seems to be the old man’s heartbeat. Whether the sound is real or imagined, the pressure becomes unbearable, and the narrator confesses.

## Main characters

### The narrator

The narrator tells the story directly to the reader and repeatedly argues that they are not mad. The problem is that almost everything they say proves the opposite. Their point of view makes the story intense because we are trapped inside a mind that is paranoid, obsessive, and unreliable.

### The old man

The old man is the narrator’s victim. Poe gives us very little detail about him, which keeps the focus on the narrator’s obsession. The narrator claims to love the old man but cannot stand his pale “vulture eye.”

### The police officers

The police arrive after a neighbor hears a shriek. They appear calm and ordinary, but their presence increases the narrator’s panic until the confession happens.

## Key plot beats

1. The narrator insists they are sane.
2. The narrator explains an obsession with the old man’s eye.
3. The narrator watches the old man at night for several days.
4. On the final night, the narrator kills the old man and hides the body beneath the floorboards.
5. Police arrive after a neighbor reports a sound.
6. The narrator acts confident at first.
7. The narrator hears a heartbeat growing louder and louder.
8. The narrator breaks down and confesses.

## Major themes

### Guilt cannot stay buried

The narrator physically hides the evidence, but psychologically the guilt keeps rising. The heartbeat becomes a symbol of guilt that cannot be ignored.

### Obsession distorts judgment

The narrator focuses so intensely on the old man’s eye that ordinary moral judgment collapses. The obsession becomes more powerful than reason.

# Stick to the Classics

Classic literature explained before the quiz

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## Unreliable narration changes everything

Because the narrator is unstable and self-justifying, readers have to question every claim. The story teaches students to separate what a narrator says from what the story reveals.

## Suspense is built through pacing and sound

Poe stretches time, repeats phrases, and uses sound to make readers feel trapped inside the narrator's panic.

## Important symbols

### The eye

The old man's eye may represent the narrator's fear of being watched, judged, or exposed. It is less important as a physical detail than as the focus of the narrator's obsession.

### The heartbeat

The heartbeat can be read as guilt, panic, conscience, or hallucination. Poe leaves room for interpretation, which makes it a strong discussion point.

### The floorboards

The floorboards represent the narrator's attempt to hide the truth. The confession shows that hiding evidence is not the same as escaping guilt.

## Vocabulary

Word Student-friendly meaning Why it matters

acute very sharp or intense The narrator claims unusually sharp senses.

vexed annoyed, troubled, or disturbed The old man's eye deeply bothers the narrator.

dissimulation hiding true feelings or intentions The narrator tries to seem calm and innocent.

audacity bold confidence or daring The narrator behaves confidently near the police.

vehemently forcefully or intensely The narrator's emotions become harder to control.

derision mockery or ridicule The narrator imagines the police may be mocking them.

## What students should remember

- The narrator is unreliable.
- Poe uses first-person point of view to trap readers in the narrator's mind.
- The eye drives the narrator's obsession.
- The heartbeat most likely represents guilt, fear, or conscience.
- The story's suspense comes from repetition, pacing, sound, and psychological pressure.

# Quiz Questions

Name: \_

Date: \_

### Multiple choice

1. Who narrates "The Tell-Tale Heart"?
  - A. The old man
  - B. A police officer
  - C. An unnamed first-person narrator
  - D. A neighbor
2. What does the narrator repeatedly try to prove?
  - A. That the old man deserved to be rich
  - B. That the narrator is sane
  - C. That the police are guilty
  - D. That the neighbor imagined everything
3. What physical feature of the old man bothers the narrator most?
  - A. His hand
  - B. His voice
  - C. His eye
  - D. His shadow
4. Why is the narrator considered unreliable?
  - A. The narrator forgets the old man's name.
  - B. The narrator makes claims that conflict with their behavior and mental state.
  - C. The narrator tells the story in third person.
  - D. The narrator refuses to describe the setting.
5. What sound does the narrator believe they hear near the end?
  - A. A bell ringing
  - B. The neighbor screaming
  - C. The old man's heartbeat
  - D. A window opening
6. What causes the narrator to confess?
  - A. The police discover the body immediately.
  - B. The old man returns.
  - C. The narrator cannot stand the imagined heartbeat and pressure.
  - D. The neighbor threatens the narrator.
7. Which theme is most strongly supported by the ending?
  - A. Guilt can become impossible to escape.
  - B. Wealth always corrupts people.
  - C. Nature is more powerful than humans.
  - D. Friendship solves conflict.
- 8. Poe builds suspense mainly through:**
  - A. jokes and comic dialogue
  - B. repetition, pacing, point of view, and sound imagery
  - C. long descriptions of nature
  - D. a large cast of characters

## Stick to the Classics

Classic literature explained before the quiz

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### 9. The old man's eye most likely symbolizes:

- A. the narrator's obsession and fear of being watched or judged
- B. the old man's kindness
- C. the police investigation
- D. the neighbor's suspicion

10. Which statement best describes the narrator's attitude toward the police at first?

- A. Calm and confident
- B. Honest and apologetic
- C. Confused and silent
- D. Angry and violent

### Short answer

11. Give one piece of evidence that the narrator is unreliable.

12. How does Poe use sound to create suspense?

13. What might the heartbeat represent besides an actual heartbeat?

14. Why does the narrator's repeated claim of sanity have the opposite effect on the reader?

### Mini-response

15. In 5–7 sentences, explain how Poe uses point of view to make "The Tell-Tale Heart" suspenseful. Use at least one specific detail from the story.

# Discussion & Writing Prompts

## Before watching or reading

1. What makes a narrator trustworthy?
2. Can guilt change what a person thinks they see or hear?
3. Why do some scary stories become more intense when very little actually happens on the page?

## After reading discussion questions

1. Is the narrator insane, guilty, manipulative, or some combination of all three?
2. Why does Poe give the old man so little personality or background?
3. What matters more in the story: the actual crime or the narrator's mind?
4. Does the heartbeat come from the old man, the narrator's imagination, or the narrator's conscience?
5. Why does the narrator confess if the police have not found the body?
6. How does Poe make silence feel suspenseful?
7. Which detail best proves that the narrator is unreliable?
8. What does the old man's eye represent?
9. How would the story change if it were told by one of the police officers?
10. Why is this short story still taught and remembered?

## Small-group activity

Assign each group one focus area:

- Group 1: Evidence that the narrator is unreliable
- Group 2: How Poe builds suspense
- Group 3: What the eye symbolizes
- Group 4: What the heartbeat symbolizes
- Group 5: Why the ending works

Each group should find 2–3 specific story details and prepare a 60-second explanation.

## Writing prompts

### Short paragraph prompt

In one paragraph, explain whether the heartbeat is real or imagined. Use evidence from the story.

### Literary analysis prompt

How does Poe use unreliable narration to create suspense in "The Tell-Tale Heart"? Write 2–3 paragraphs using specific details from the story.

### Creative rewrite prompt

Rewrite the police visit from the point of view of one police officer. Keep the same basic event, but show how the narrator appears from the outside.

### Debate prompt

Which is more powerful in the story: fear or guilt? Defend your answer with evidence.

## Exit ticket

Answer in 2–3 sentences:

What is one thing Poe does to make the reader feel trapped inside the narrator's mind?

# Teacher Use Notes

## Suggested classroom use

This package can work as:

- a pre-reading hook
- a post-reading review
- a substitute lesson
- a short Gothic literature mini-unit
- a tutoring or homeschool guide
- a quick assessment after watching the Stick to the Classics video

## 30-minute lesson flow

1. Warm-up — 3 minutes

Ask: "What makes a narrator trustworthy?"

2. Watch video or review story summary — 5 minutes

Use the completed Stick to the Classics video as a fast plot/theme refresher.

3. Study guide focus — 7 minutes

Review unreliable narration, the eye, the heartbeat, and guilt.

4. Discussion — 8 minutes

Use 2–3 discussion prompts. Best starter: "Is the heartbeat real or imagined?"

5. Quiz or exit ticket — 7 minutes

Use the quiz for assessment or assign the exit ticket from the prompt file.

## 45–50 minute lesson flow

1. Warm-up question

2. Read or recap key passages

3. Watch the video

4. Small-group evidence hunt

5. Group share-out

6. Quiz or short writing prompt

## Differentiation ideas

- For struggling readers: focus on plot beats, symbols, and narrator reliability.
- For advanced students: compare the narrator's claims with textual evidence.
- For ELL students: preview vocabulary before reading and use the summary after reading.
- For homeschool/tutoring: use the discussion questions orally before the written quiz.

## Teacher caution

The story includes murder and psychological distress. It is commonly taught, but teachers should match use to student maturity and school expectations.

## Best pairing with the video

Use the video after students have read the story if the goal is review and comprehension. Use it before reading only if you are comfortable previewing the main plot and ending.

### Recommended extension

Have students create a two-column chart:

Narrator claim What the story actually shows

“I am sane.” The narrator obsessively watches and kills the old man.

“I was calm.” The narrator becomes overwhelmed by the imagined heartbeat.

This is a simple way to teach unreliable narration with evidence.

# Standards Alignment

These are suggested Common Core ELA alignments for grades 7–10. Teachers should adapt based on district/state requirements.

## Reading Literature

- RL.7.1 / RL.8.1 / RL.9-10.1 — Cite textual evidence to support analysis and inferences.
- RL.7.2 / RL.8.2 / RL.9-10.2 — Determine theme/central idea and provide an objective summary.
- RL.7.3 / RL.8.3 / RL.9-10.3 — Analyze how characters, conflict, and plot develop and interact.
- RL.7.4 / RL.8.4 / RL.9-10.4 — Determine meaning of words/phrases and analyze figurative/connotative meaning, repetition, and sound imagery.
- RL.7.6 / RL.8.6 / RL.9-10.6 — Analyze point of view, narrator reliability, and author choices.

## Writing

- W.7.2 / W.8.2 / W.9-10.2 — Write explanatory/informative texts.
- W.7.9 / W.8.9 / W.9-10.9 — Draw evidence from literary texts to support analysis.

## Speaking and Listening

- SL.7.1 / SL.8.1 / SL.9-10.1 — Participate in collaborative discussions.

## Best-fit skills for this resource

- Unreliable narration
- Theme development
- Symbolism
- Sound imagery
- Suspense and pacing
- Character motivation
- Evidence-based literary analysis

## Product listing note

Phrase this as “supports standards-aligned ELA skills” rather than promising full district compliance. Add state-specific language later only after verification.

# Answer Key

## Multiple choice

1. C — An unnamed first-person narrator
2. B — That the narrator is sane
3. C — His eye
4. B — The narrator makes claims that conflict with their behavior and mental state.
5. C — The old man's heartbeat
6. C — The narrator cannot stand the imagined heartbeat and pressure.
7. A — Guilt can become impossible to escape.
8. B — Repetition, pacing, point of view, and sound imagery
9. A — The narrator's obsession and fear of being watched or judged
10. A — Calm and confident

## Short-answer sample responses

11. Evidence of unreliable narration: The narrator insists on being sane while describing stalking and murder with obsessive detail. The narrator also appears to hear a heartbeat that may not be physically real.
12. Sound and suspense: Poe uses the imagined heartbeat, the old man's groan, silence, and repeated references to sound to make the reader feel the narrator's panic growing.
13. Heartbeat meaning: The heartbeat may represent guilt, conscience, fear, paranoia, or the narrator's psychological collapse.
14. Sanity claim: The more the narrator insists on being sane, the more unstable the narrator sounds. The repeated defense makes readers question the narrator's judgment.

## Mini-response scoring guide

### A strong response should include:

- A clear claim about first-person point of view.
- Evidence that readers are inside the narrator's mind.
- An explanation of unreliable narration.
- At least one detail such as the eye, the nighttime watching, the hidden body, or the heartbeat.
- A connection to suspense, guilt, or psychological pressure.

### Sample mini-response

Poe uses first-person point of view to make "The Tell-Tale Heart" suspenseful because the reader experiences the story through the narrator's unstable mind. The narrator keeps insisting that they are sane, but their actions and thoughts reveal obsession and panic. This makes the reader question what is real, especially when the narrator hears the heartbeat near the end. The old man's eye also becomes frightening because we only understand it through the narrator's distorted perspective. By trapping us inside this unreliable voice, Poe makes the story feel tense and claustrophobic.