

# Perspective Taking

## What is Perspective Taking?

We live in a “small world” with as many different ways of seeing things as there are people. Perspective taking allows us to consider more than one way of understanding a behavior, event, or situation. This skill is particularly useful on a global scale as our ability to communicate and our need to share resources with other people and cultures expand.

## Why Practice Perspective Taking?

On the most practical level, students who are able to accept that other classmates may behave or think differently than they do are much better equipped to tolerate and find ways to get along with peers. These students can talk out a problem and find a solution that is mutually agreeable.

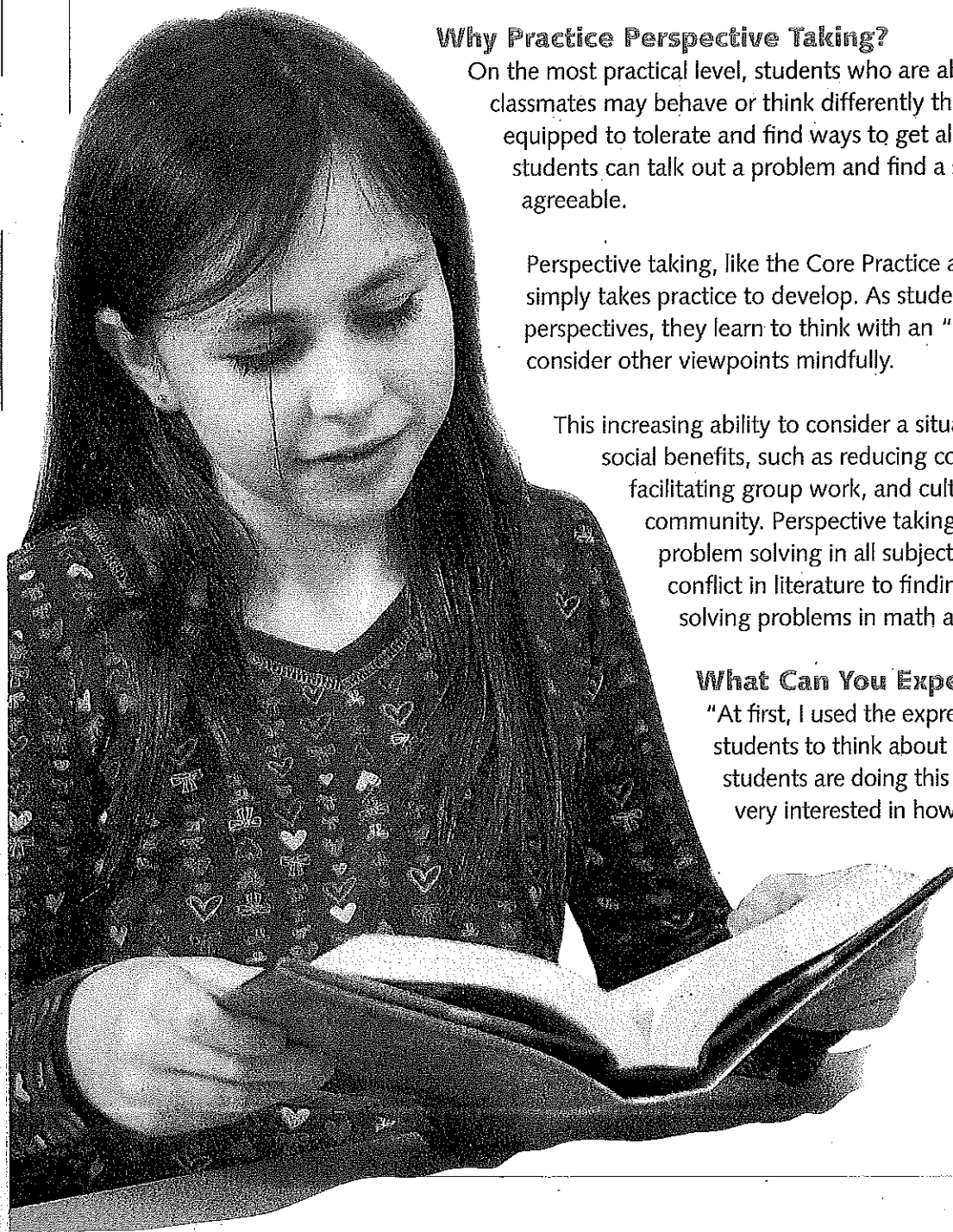
Perspective taking, like the Core Practice and other mindful skills, simply takes practice to develop. As students routinely identify other perspectives, they learn to think with an “open mind”—to pause and consider other viewpoints mindfully.

This increasing ability to consider a situation in multiple ways has social benefits, such as reducing conflicts among students, facilitating group work, and cultivating an inclusive peer community. Perspective taking is an essential skill for problem solving in all subject areas, from understanding conflict in literature to finding alternative strategies for solving problems in math and science.

## What Can You Expect to Observe?

“At first, I used the expression ‘Let’s flip it.’ to cue students to think about different points of view. Now students are doing this spontaneously. They are very interested in how the same situation might affect people differently. This is making our class discussions more subtle and deeper.”

—Seventh-grade teacher

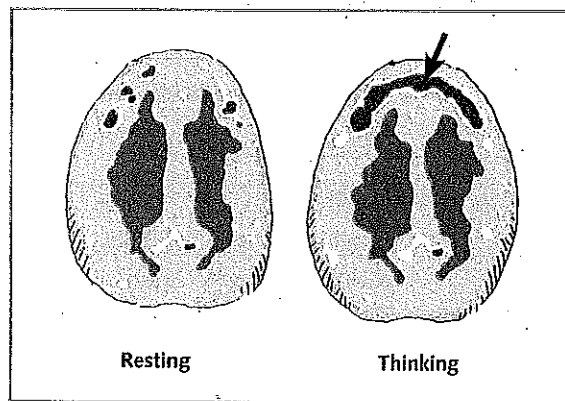


# Linking to Brain Research

## Opening the Mind to the Prefrontal Cortex

Perspective taking is the ability to see situations and events from the viewpoint of another person. When we mindfully practice perspective taking, we become more skilled at accurately interpreting the behavior of those around us. Mentally standing in someone else's shoes requires reflection, which can forestall an unthinking reaction. Repeatedly viewing issues or events through different lenses builds and strengthens the neural networks that enable us to reason before we take action. Paying attention to a situation in a calm, focused, mindful manner is a physiological workout for the brain, actually stimulating blood flow to it. Calm perspective taking directs incoming information on to the reflective, thinking prefrontal cortex instead of to the reflexive, reacting amygdala.

As students learn to consider alternate points of view, they can more effectively quell their own anxieties, exercise impulse control, and gauge their own behaviors and reactions in response to others. When differences of opinion are honored, and disagreement is respectful, students perceive the classroom as safe and risk-free. This unstressed state of mind allows their amygdala to "stand down" and puts the prefrontal cortex in control. A brain that operates primarily in the prefrontal cortex makes superior decisions, facilitating good choices for its owner.



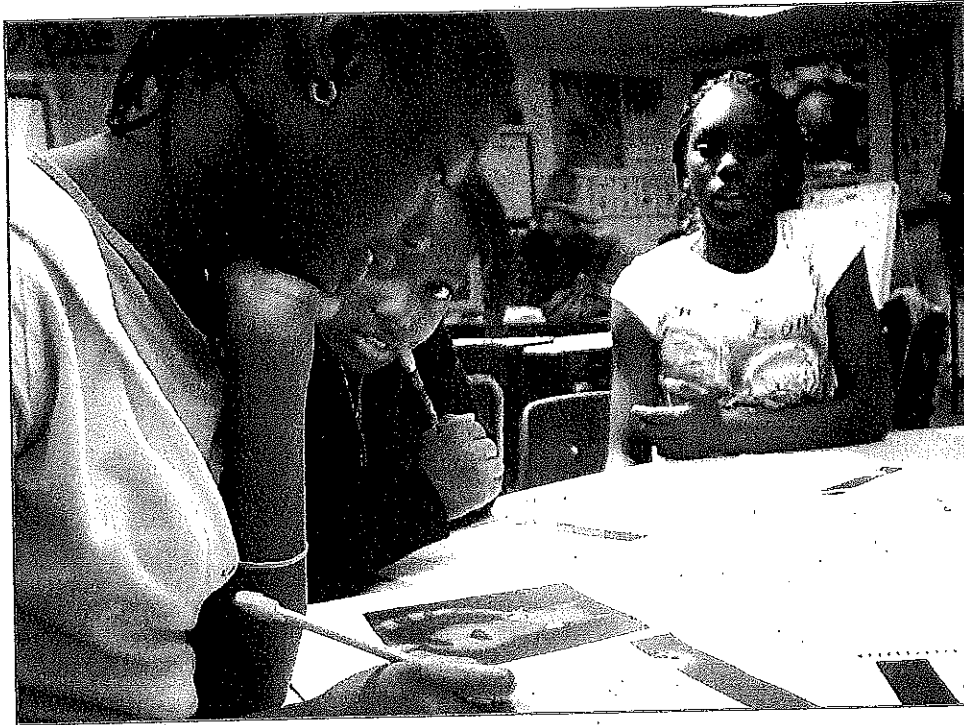
These scans show where blood is flowing in the brain. Notice the increased blood flow in the prefrontal cortex area (arrow) of the thinking brain.

## Clarify for the Class

Practicing origami is a good analogy for the building of neural pathways through repeated practices, such as perspective taking. Explain that refolding an already creased origami sheet goes faster, like the improved speed of a much-used chain of connected neurons. Help students fold a star, frog, or other simple origami figure. Next have them unfold the figure until it's a flat sheet again, then refold it into an origami figure.

**Discuss:** Why was it easier to fold the origami figure the second time? Was it faster, too? How is this like building and strengthening neural pathways? What repeated thoughts might help your brain to carefully consider actions before doing them?

# Getting Ready



**Character Contrasts**  
Students try to identify each character's perspective in a fable.

## GOALS

- Students identify different perspectives of characters in a story.
- Students apply open-minded perspective taking to social situations in their own lives.

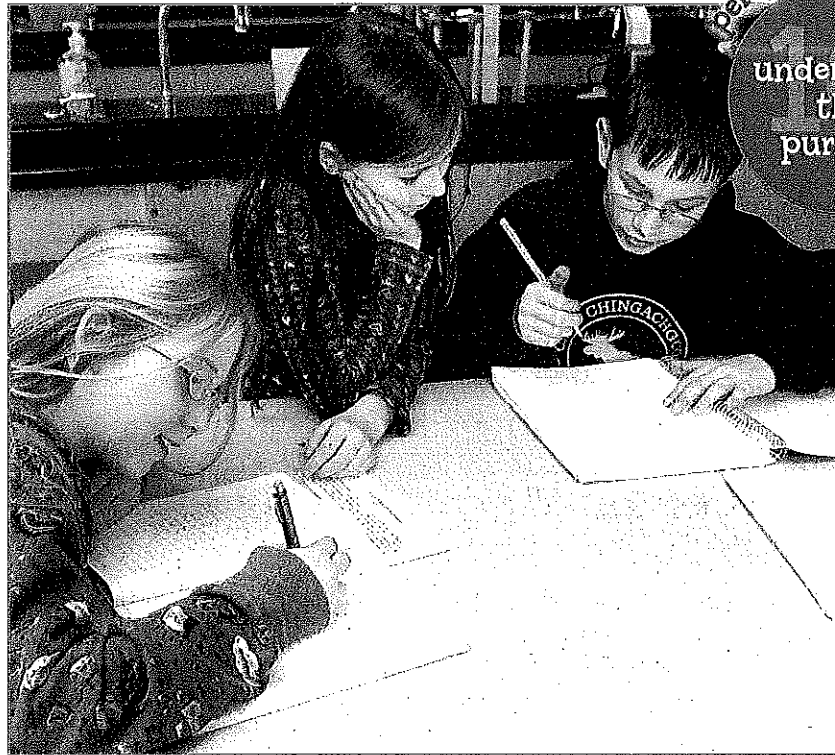
## MATERIALS

- book of African folktales, Greek myths, or Aesop's fables (Possible stories: Anansi the Spider, Demeter and Persephone, The Fox and the Grapes)
- Character Perspectives activity sheet (p. 156)

| Character   | Perspective | Evidence |
|-------------|-------------|----------|
| Character 1 |             |          |
| Character 2 |             |          |

## CREATING THE OPTIMISTIC CLASSROOM

**Supporting English Language Learners** Modeling the emotional component of written dialogue is especially helpful for second-language learners. It helps them build expressive language skills of stress placement and gesture to convey emotion. Have English-speaking volunteers read any dialogue from the story, using appropriate facial expressions and body language ("Those grapes are probably sour anyway!" said the wolf.) Understanding the emotional content of characters' words will help second-language learners understand and discuss different points of view.

**More Brains, Better Ideas**

Work on perspective-taking helps build group-work skills, such as a willingness to consider alternative ideas.

## MINDUP Warm-Up

### Perspective-Taking Practice

Explain that there is a famous parable of the six blind men and the elephant. None of them sees the whole elephant, but each touches a different part and forms a conclusion.

- The first man touches the trunk.
- The second man touches the leg.
- The third man touches the ear.
- The fourth touches the side.
- The fifth touches the tail.
- The sixth touches the tusk.

Introduce the term *perspective* and the term *conflict*, before you discuss what each man's experience of the elephant might have been.

**Discuss:** Have students form six groups and describe the elephant based on only one of its parts. Ask each group to prepare a statement they could use in a debate about what the elephant is like. Then as a class, talk about how the conflict might be resolved. Finally ask, "What might the elephant be used to represent?" (any situation, or problem, or even reality itself).

# Leading the Lesson

## Get Into Their Heads

### Engage

#### What to Do

Choose a traditional story, myth, or fable (see Materials for suggestions) to read aloud with the class. Select a story with a limited number of characters. Help students connect inferences they make about each character to the different perspectives in the warm-up activity.

- How can a character's actions and words help a reader figure out the character's point of view? (Their words and thoughts help you know what they want and don't want.)
- What other kinds of information can help you determine the character's perspective? (Descriptions and backgrounds can also tell you about a character.)

Have the class choose one character to study, display the Character Perspectives activity sheet, and lead students through a character-perspective analysis. Scribe answers from volunteers so that everyone has a record.

### Explore

Invite students to rewrite the story from one character's point of view. Hand out copies of the activity sheet to pairs or groups of three.

- How does the perspective of this character change the story?
- Which characters might share a similar perspective?
- How does this character's perspective differ from the neutral perspective of a narrator?

Explore any conflicts this character has in the story. Discuss ways that these conflicts might be settled through a mutually beneficial agreement or a compromise.

#### Why It's Important

Story characters provide a good way to engage students in the study of perspective—and because the characters are fictional, students do not have a personal stake in the characters' conflicts. Encourage students to mindfully explore each character's perspective and motivation. If students begin to make judgments, remind them to keep a mindful and tolerant attitude.

Now that they're familiar with analyzing one character's perspective on a given event, they can use this perspective as a point of contrast to examine another character's perspective. Although the activity can be done independently, students benefit from group discussion in which they can clarify any confusion and narrow down their best ideas.

## From the Research

Students experienced a greater level of understanding of concepts ... when they talked, explained, and argued about them ... instead of just passively listening to a lecture or reading a text. (Iidaka et. al., 2000)

## Reflect

Have students think about the story and how many different ways it could have been told. Connect this way of stepping back from the situation to see all the different perspectives with other mindful exercises they have done.

- When you try to understand something from someone else's point of view, you are "taking a different perspective." How is that like or unlike the mindful sensing activities we've been practicing?

Make sure students can connect that when they sensed mindfully, they had to pay attention to what their bodies were telling them. Now they are learning to pay attention to their own thoughts and feelings as well as those of other people in an interested, nonjudgmental way.

- What happens to thinking once a judgment has been made?
- Are judgments ever appropriate? If so, when is the best time to make them?
- What would make you want to rethink your judgments?

This reflection should guide students to conclude that:

- Different people may have different reactions or opinions regarding the same fact or event
- Taking the time to mindfully consider others' perspectives helps us take in the larger situation and helps us form better judgments.



## MINDUP In the Real World

### Career Connection

The writer I.A.R. Wylie once wrote, *True generosity...requires imagination—the capacity to see people in all their perplexities and needs, and to know how to expend ourselves effectively for them.* Peace negotiators typically possess both an abundance of imagination and unique powers of persuasion. These enable them to help those locked in conflict to transcend their own views, take the perspective of the other, and bend toward a mutually acceptable solution. "Walk a mile in my shoes" is another way of saying "step outside of yourself and imagine what it feels like to be me."

**Discuss:** How does sensitivity to multiple perspectives matter in the work done by social workers, teachers, and writers?

### Once a Day

Each day, choose one student to focus on. Observe the student closely; listen in on class conversations; talk one-on-one. Your attention can help you better understand how that student approaches work and relationships—invaluable for building community and differentiating instruction.

# Connecting to the Curriculum

Perspective taking supports students' connection to their own learning process and to the content areas and literature.

## Journal Writing

Encourage your students to reflect on what they've learned about perspective taking and to record questions to explore at another time. They may also enjoy responding to these prompts:

- Rethink your last disagreement with someone. Take the part of the other person. Write yourself a letter from the other person's perspective. What did you learn by thinking about the issue from the opposite side?
- What makes your perspective unique? Write a recipe for it. First think about a list of possible ingredients, such as values, desires, needs, experiences. Then think about the proportions. Be creative!
- Take an issue and break it down on a Venn diagram, for example, school uniforms: yes or no? Which points are disputed? Which points could the two sides agree on? Use the diagram to suggest a possible solution or compromise.
- Think of a villain from a book, movie, TV show, or even a video game. Tell the story from this perspective. Is there any way to make this character slightly more sympathetic by shifting the perspective?

## LANGUAGE ARTS

### Plot Drivers

#### What to Do

Explain that all plots are driven by a problem or conflict. Often, the conflict starts from a misunderstanding. Choose a story that is based on a misunderstanding, for example Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. Students can watch it on DVD or read an accessible version (see the Read 180 library), or read it in graphic novel form. There is even a version with zombies! Preview the plot with students beforehand.

#### What to Say

Choose one of the main characters to analyze. Think about: What perspective is this character missing? Which other character or characters have this perspective? What is preventing this character from gaining a bigger perspective? Does the character finally achieve a more complete understanding? How does the character get this knowledge? How would the story change if this character had this understanding sooner?

#### Why It's Important

Identifying plot conflicts and engaging in character analysis are important skills in language arts. Understanding how three-dimensional characters handle conflicts is also a good way for students to understand the relationships in their own lives.

## SOCIAL STUDIES

### Deadly Conflicts

#### What to Do

Have students select a historical war that interests them. Assign two students to research each war. Each student will represent one of the warring parties. Then have students working on the same war summarize their respective viewpoints to the class without stating which side they represent. See if the class can figure that out from the perspective of each summary.

#### What to Say

Wars happen when groups are unable to resolve their conflicts. Explore the different sides in one actual war. Summarize the conflict from the perspective of one side. Push your point of view as strongly as possible—make no attempt to be fair and evenhanded! Your classmates will try to guess the conflict and which side you represent.

#### Why It's Important

By concentrating on the issues of one side at a time and hearing a classmate present the other side, students will gain a deeper understanding of the most destructive conflict of all—war.



## ART/MATH

### Picture Perspective

#### What to Do

Show students a drawing of a three-dimensional shape, such as a cube, and have them identify it. Explain that during the Renaissance in Europe, artists developed a theory of perspective, applying principles of geometry to drawing to make objects appear to occupy space in a realistic way. Perspective gives the illusion of depth, representing a third dimension.

#### What to Say

*Before people knew how to use perspective, the figures they drew were two-dimensional, or flat. Try it. Draw a horizon line. Draw a tree in the foreground, then draw a line to a point on the horizon from the top and bottom of that tree where the lines meet. The vanishing point is the vertex. Draw more trees inside that angle so they get smaller in the distance. Compare your drawings. Do any two have the identical perspective?*

#### Why It's Important

Understanding perspective completely changed the way artists depict reality. Students can play with this activity to see how relocating the horizon line and vanishing point, changes the perspective. This will concretize an important art-historic milestone, as well as a fundamental math concept.

## SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING

### Conflict Resolution

#### What to Do

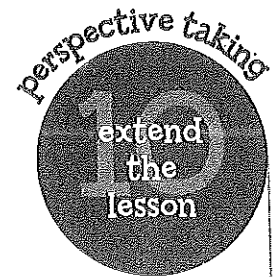
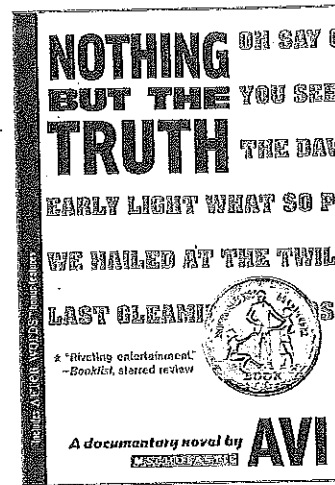
Have students construct a conflict resolution rubric they can use to settle minor disputes among themselves. Consider these steps: attitude, listening, explaining, brainstorming, agreement, follow-up. Have students describe how each step could be done mindfully. Then have students role-play a conflict while their classmates use the rubric to grade them.

#### What to Say

*Let's work in groups. Each group will describe how one step of the process could be done mindfully. Once we have created the rubric, two volunteers can choose a situation of conflict to resolve by role-play, while the rest of you use the rubric to grade them.*

#### Why It's Important

Conflict resolution depends on listening to another person's perspective and being relaxed enough to engage the PFC in mutual problem solving. With practice, students will be able to use conflict resolution skills to defuse conflicts before they escalate.



## Literature Link

### Nothing But the Truth

by Avi  
(1991). New York: Scholastic.

Ninth grader Philip Malloy is only trying to get his English class transferred but the "facts" of his story get twisted and snowball into a major national scandal. Many characters give their point of view, and the story is told in a variety of genres: journal entries, letters, memos, and dialogues.

Students will be able to connect this story to the idea of multiple perspectives and how the truth can be distorted by rushing to judgment and a failure to communicate.

## More Books to Share

Avi, and Rachel Vail. (2005). *Never Mind! A Twin Novel*. New York: HarperCollins.

Vande Velde, Vivian. (2001). *The Rumpelstiltskin Problem*. New York: Scholastic.

VanDraanen, Wendelin. (2003). *Flipped*. New York: Knopf.





Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

# Character Perspectives

Examine the way a character reacts to events in a story in order to determine his or her perspective.

Title of Story: \_\_\_\_\_

Name of Character: \_\_\_\_\_

Describe a key event in the story.

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What words, thoughts, and actions show the character's reaction to the event?

| Words | Thoughts | Actions |
|-------|----------|---------|
|       |          |         |

What does this evidence reveal about the character's perspective?

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