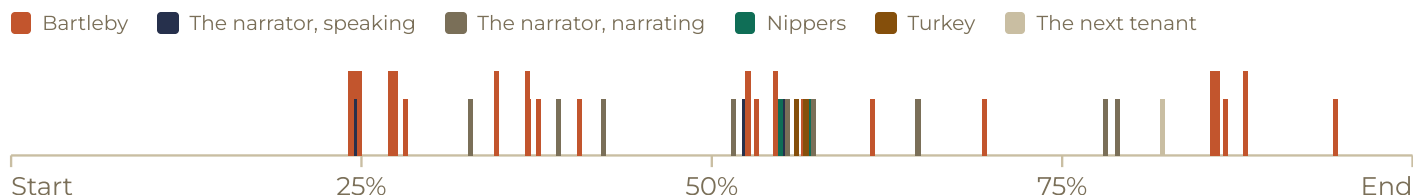


Every “Prefer” in Bartleby, the Scrivener

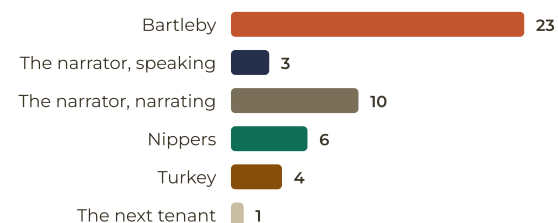
The word “prefer” appears 47 times in the 14,358 words of the story. Bartleby says it 23 of those times, and the exact sentence — “I would prefer not to” — only 13. In the scene at the story’s midpoint, he is not even the one saying it most.

EVERY “PREFER,” IN ORDER

One tick per use, placed where it falls in the text and colored by who says it. The tall ticks are the exact sentence.



WHO SAYS IT



In one scene just past the story’s midpoint the word is said 15 times and only 2 of them by Bartleby: Nippers 6, Turkey 4, and the narrator, who has just caught himself “involuntarily using this word ‘prefer’ upon all sorts of not exactly suitable occasions.”

THIRTEEN TIMES, EXACTLY

WHERE	ASKED	ANSWER
24%	To help compare a copied document	“I would prefer not to.”
25%	The same request, repeated	“I would prefer not to.”
25%	To compare a sheet thrust at him	“I would prefer not to.”
27%	To examine the fourth copy with the others	“I would prefer not to.”
27%	Why he refuses	“I would prefer not to.”
35%	To compare the papers once they are copied	“I would prefer not to.”
37%	To step round to the Post Office	“I would prefer not to.”
53%	Where he was born	“I would prefer not to.”
53%	To tell anything about himself	“I would prefer not to.”
55%	To begin to be a little reasonable in a day or two	“At present I would prefer not to be a little reasonable.”
86%	Whether he would copy for someone else	“No; I would prefer not to make any change.”
86%	A clerkship in a dry-goods store	“I would prefer not to take a clerkship.”
88%	To come home with the narrator for now	“No: at present I would prefer not to make any change at all.”



Every number here is drawn from the interactive map of the text.

Scan the code, or visit constellate-atlas.app/stories/bartleby-prefer-not-to to open the map and the story behind this page, with the passage behind every line.

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An office with no family tree

The map of the story has 12 figures and 23 lines between them. Sorted by kind, 20 of the lines are work and none is a parent, a child or a sibling. The only family tie is a marriage between the prison's grub-man and a wife who never appears.

THE MAP'S 23 LINES, BY KIND

Employer, tenant, client, visitor	10
Colleague	7
Servant or errand	3
Hostile	2
Marriage	1
Parent, child or sibling	0

BARTLEBY'S 7 LINES

The narrator	Employs him
Turkey	Copies beside him
Nippers	Copies beside him
Ginger Nut	Fetches his ginger-nuts
The next tenant	Turns him out of the rooms
The landlord	Has him taken to the Tombs
Mr. Cutlets	Is paid to feed him

Every one of them is a transaction. The narrator remembers that Bartleby "had declined telling who he was, or whence he came, or whether he had any relatives in the world." The map draws that refusal as empty space.

QUESTIONS FOR A CLASS

1. The first "I would prefer not to" comes a quarter of the way into the story. What has the narrator spent the first quarter doing, and why might Melville hold the sentence back that long?
2. Read down the "Asked" column. How do the requests change between the first refusal and the last? Does the answer change with them?
3. Nippers and Turkey both catch the word and both deny it. What does the story gain by letting the word spread to people who dislike Bartleby?
4. The map has no family on it, and the one proper name in the story belongs to John Jacob Astor. What does the subtitle, *A Story of Wall-Street*, ask you to notice?
5. The narrator's closing report about the Dead Letter Office is a rumor, and he says so. Why do readers treat it as the explanation anyway?

HOW THIS WAS COUNTED

Every occurrence of "prefer," "prefers," "preferred" and "preferences" in Melville's text (Project Gutenberg #11231), placed by its position in the story and credited to the speaker of its sentence; the narrator's uses are split between dialogue and narration. The exact sentence is "I would prefer not to," counted whether or not an object follows. The line kinds are the map's own.



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