

FICTION: How to read a novel and a short story

When starting to read a fictional text, you may find it helpful to start by asking yourself the following wh-questions:

where does the story take place?

when does the story take place?

who appears in the text, what characters?

what happens?

why does this happen?

To get a more detailed interpretation of the text these questions may be useful.

Setting (time, place, social environment)

- Where and when does the text take place? Is it in the real or in an imaginary world?
- Does the place of action remain the same or is there more than one physical setting?
- Is there any indication in the text of the social environment?
- Is it described in detail or hinted at?
- Does the setting create a particular atmosphere?
- Does it reveal anything about the characters' feelings?

Characters

- How many characters are involved in the action?
- Who are they, and what do we learn about them? (Age, appearance, family situation, background, education, job, language, thoughts and opinions)
- Are they all introduced at once, or do they appear gradually?

- Do the characters remain the same throughout the story, or do they develop? Are they flat or complex characters? What causes development or change?

Events/structure/composition

- Does the story have an introduction or does it start in medias res?
- Are the events presented in chronological order? If not, why not?
- Are there flashbacks?
- What is the initial situation, the development, the final situation? Will there be any future development?
- Are there hints at events likely to happen?
- What is the relation between characters and events?
- Is the ending open or closed? Is it predictable/unpredictable, expected/unexpected?
- What is the effect of the ending on the reader: surprise, relief, astonishment, fulfilment?

Narration/point of view

- Is it a first person or third person narrative?
- Is the narrator reliable or unreliable?
- If it is a third person narrator, is the narrator omniscient or non-omniscient?
- What is the narrator's attitude to the events and the other characters?
- Are the characters described directly by the author, or indirectly by what they say or do?
- Which narrative modes are used: direct/indirect speech, description, report, comment?

Fiction

Atmosphere

- What is the atmosphere of the text?
Is it conveyed through direct description or indirectly by what the characters say or do?

Theme

- What subject(s) does the text fundamentally deal with, or what is the main idea of the text?
A theme could be: love, the generation gap, prejudice.

Message

- What is the moral of the text, or what has the writer tried to tell the reader through the text?
- Does the writer intend to entertain, educate or influence the reader?

Tone

- What is the writer's attitude to the characters, the events, or the theme, and how is it conveyed?

Language/Style

- Is the language simple or complex, formal/informal/colloquial?
- Does the language belong to a certain dialect or sociolect?
- Is a particular part of speech/word class common in the text? Which and what is the effect?
- Is imagery applied? Is symbolism? What is the effect of this on the reader?

Title

- What is the link between the title, the characters, and the cause of events?
- Does the title create expectations about the text? Arouse curiosity? Suggest an interpretation?

Other texts

- Relate the texts to other texts on the same or a similar theme.
What are the similarities and differences? Which do you prefer and why?

