ANALYSIS ANGLES

How to take a closer look at texts, pictures, films and websites

ANALYZE

(Partial text visible at left edge of facing page:)

sider

s. Cut
k them
nd use
icture

hat
shows

Textual Genres

FICTION		
Prose	**Poetry**	**Drama**
Short story Novel Fairy tale Fable Myth …	Poem • Lyrical poem • Narrative poem • Prose poem Song • Ballad • Hymn • …	Play • Comedy • Tragedy • … Film • Horror film • Animated film • … Musical • …

NON-FICTION	
Prose	**Film**

Letter
  • Personal letter
  • Business letter
  • …
Article
  • News article
  • Feature article
  • Opinion piece
  • Interview
(Auto)biography
Memoir
Diary
Speech
Essay
Textbook
User manual
Advertisement
• …
	Documentary film
	  • Wildlife film
	  • Travel documentary
	  • Concert film
	  • …

Further reading

As the dotted lines indicate, there are more text genres and subgenres than the ones listed above. For more detailed lists, see for example the entries "List of literary genres" and "Non-fiction" on Wikipedia.

Questions

1. How would you define fiction vs. non-fiction – and prose, poetry and drama?
2. Do you understand the other words on this page? If not, look them up in an advanced learner's dictionary or an encyclopedia.
3. Some of the genres are meant to be more than a text on paper (or manuscript). Which ones?

Fiction Texts

Genre

Is the text
- a poem
- a short story
- (an excerpt from) a novel
- a play
- or ...?

See also the section on textual genres, p. 322.

Setting

Where and when do the events take place – and in which social environment?

Does the setting have a symbolic meaning or any other significance?

Characters

What are we told about the characters, and what can we conclude about them, e.g. in terms of age, looks, background, behaviour and personality?

Do the characters develop? If so, how? If not, why?

Are they
- flat (two-dimensional) with only a few characteristics (e.g. ugly and evil), like in fairy tales?
- round (complex) like real people?

Does the protagonist (main character) have an antagonist (enemy)?

Point of view

By whom are the events told?
- a 1st person narrator (using pronouns like *I, me, we and us*)
- a 2nd person narrator (using *you, your* or *yours*)? This is rare.
- a 3rd person narrator (using *he, she, they,* etc.)

If it is a 1st person narrator, is he
- reliable, i.e. someone whom the author/text gives us no reason not to trust?
- unreliable, i.e. someone whose account of the events we may question because of his characteristics (e.g. mental disability) or because of details contradicting his account?

If it is a 3rd person narrator, is this point of view

- omniscient, i.e. with a full knowledge of the events and the thoughts of the various characters
- objective, i.e. with an entirely external view like a camera
- limited (or subjective), i.e. restricted to one character's perception and thoughts?

What is the effect of the chosen point of view?

For poems, use the word *speaker*, not *narrator* (which means *story-teller*).

Composition

How is the text structured, i.e. what parts may it be divided into?

Is there a certain pattern to this, e.g.
- a circular composition
- a home-away-home structure as in fairy tales
- a classic suspense curve including the following parts:
  1. exposition (introduction of the situation and the characters)
  2. rising action (through conflict)
  3. climax (turning point for the better or worse for the protagonist)
  4. falling action
  5. resolution (of the conflict and return to normality) (also known as denouement)?
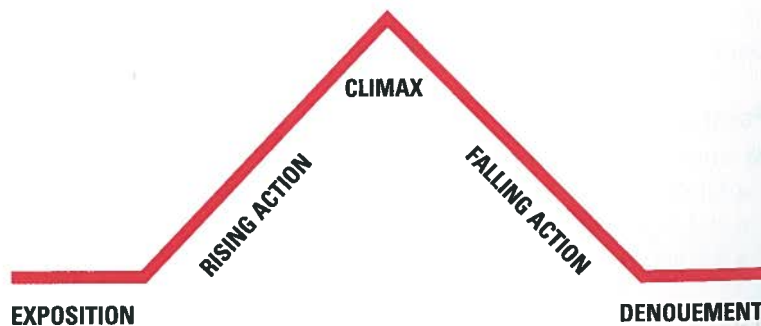
This classic suspense curve (also known as Freytag's Pyramid) can be found in a lot of drama and other fiction

Are the events told
- in a strictly chronological order
- with flashbacks or flashforwards?

Are there other compositional elements? For instance, does the text
- start in medias res (in mid-action, without any introduction)
- have an open ending (where not all of the details are wrapped up, which leaves the reader wondering what will happen)
- use foreshadowing (warning signs)
- have red herrings (misleading clues)
- use the rule of three (series of three elements)
- introduce a deus-ex-machina (something new and unexpected that suddenly solves the conflict)?

For poems, also consider
- the number of stanzas
- the number of lines in each stanza
- rhyme
- rhythm
- whether the poem is written in fixed verse (e.g. with a certain number of lines in each stanza and a consistent rhyme scheme and metre) or in free verse
- whether the poem is narrative (tells a story) or lyrical (describes feelings).

Language

Is the language
- formal (fit for official and serious occasions)
- informal (more suitable for private everyday situations)
- simple (with common words and short sentences)
- complex (with difficult words and long sentences with subordinate clauses)?

What kind of English is used?
- standard English (whatever form of English that is accepted as the national norm in a particular English-speaking country)
- a dialect (language coloured by a certain region)
- a sociolect (language coloured by a certain social class)
- an idiolect (a way of speaking or writing that is unique to one particular person)

Is there any figurative language (imagery), such as
- similes (comparisons using an image and the words *like* or *as*, as in "the shop was like a goldmine" or "you are as sweet as sugar")

- metaphors (similar to similes, but without *like* or *as*, as in "the shop was a goldmine")
- personification (when something non-human is given human characteristics, as in "the moon smiled at us")
- metonymy (when something is referred to by mentioning only a part of it, as in "we must wait to hear from the crown" where the last word refers to members of a royal family)
- idioms (common expressions using imagery, e.g. "to keep an eye out for something" or "to pull someone's leg")?

Are there other rhetorical devices, such as
- alliteration (e.g. "I'm honoured to lead the land I love")
- rhetorical questions (sentence phrased as a question, but not meant to be answered, as in the angry outburst "Can you do anything right at all?")
- puns (a play on words, their meanings and sounds, as in the diet slogan "Are you going the wrong weigh?")
- repetition, e.g. anaphora (successive sentences starting with the same words, as in "**We shall** not fail. **We shall** go on to the end. **We shall** never surrender")
- neologisms (new, made-up words, as in "The **Jabberwock**, with eyes of flame / Came **whiffling** through the **tulgey** wood")
- hyperbole (an exaggeration, as in "I'm going to explode if you call me that name again")
- understatement (the opposite of hyperbole, e.g. if you say that your exam went "OK" after getting full marks)
- euphemism (a term used to avoid saying a problematic word, e.g. *senior citizen* instead of *old person*)
- contrast (or antithesis) (as in "Patience is **bitter**, but it has a **sweet** fruit")
- paradox (a statement that appears to contradict itself, as in "sometimes you have to be cruel to be kind")
- irony (when someone says the opposite of what she means)
- allusions (short, implicit or explicit references to a famous text, event, person, etc.)?

What is the effect of this style or these devices?

Tone

What is the mood of the text (i.e. the writer's general attitude to the subject matter)? For instance, is it concerned, indignant, amused, sarcastic or resigned?

Symbols

Does anything in the text represent more than itself and have a symbolic meaning? For example, a character's fierce dog might symbolise the aggressive aspects of his personality.

Theme

What general topic is the text about? Unrequited love, racial prejudice or ...?

How does the title reflect the theme?

Message

Are we meant to learn something from the text? If so, what is the moral of it?

Further reading

For more aspects to study in fiction texts, use the book entitled *Along Literary Lines – A Key to Text Analysis* by Hans Elgaard Mogensen and Karsten Kristensen Back, or type "All American: Glossary of Literary Terms" in an Internet search engine, or look up "Index of literary terms" on Wikipedia.

A piece of advice

When analysing a text, picture or film, you do not necessarily have to focus on all the aspects listed on these pages. Focus only on the aspects that are relevant to the work and may help you to fully understand it.

Non-Fiction Texts

Genre

Is the text
- a speech
- a letter
- a diary entry
- (an excerpt from) a biography
- or …?

See also the the section on textual genres, p. 322.

If the text is an article, is it
- a news article (about something that has just happened or been discovered)
- a feature article (whose subject is not a piece of news, but rather a country, for example, or a general problem)
- an interview. NB: An interview may also just form a part of another article genre.
- an opinion piece (focusing on the writer's opinions on a subject), e.g.
  - an editorial (the editor's view on a subject of current interest)
  - a column (the regularly appearing opinions of a particular writer)
  - a letter to the editor (a reader's opinion on an issue)?

Rhetorical situation

SUBJECT: What is the text about?

SENDER: Who is behind the text? Is it simply the writer – or does she represent an organisation?

RECEIVER: Who is meant to read the text? Is it someone with similar or different opinions? And is it someone new to the subject or someone who knows about it already?

MEDIUM: Where did the text originally appear, i.e. what paper, book, website, etc. does it come from? Is two-way communication possible in this medium (as on social media) or only one-way communication (as in supermarket leaflets)? What else do you know about this medium, its authors and their aims?

CONTEXT: Under what circumstances and for what occasion was the text written? How does this influence it?

Rhetorical purpose

Why has the text been written?

- to inform us
- to persuade us
- to entertain us

If its purpose is to **inform** us, what is this information? Is the text solely informative and accordingly rather objective and matter-of-fact?

If its purpose is to **persuade** us, what is the opinion that the writer wants us to have? What arguments and/or tricks does he use in order to convince us? For example, does he use loaded words, euphemisms or omissions? See also "Language" under "Fiction Texts", p. 325.

If its purpose is to **entertain** us, what kind of entertainment is it (e.g. humour or suspense) – and what makes the text entertaining in this way?

Rhetorical modes

How does the writer try to convince the reader? Does he appeal to

- logos (our sense of reason) by using facts, figures and rational arguments
- pathos (our emotions), e.g. by trying to scare us or make us angry or to stir our compassion
- ethos (our trust) by building up our confidence in him or referring to someone else who is supposed to have a certain authority?

Arguments

If the author uses arguments, look at the most essential ones and for each one find

- the claim (the opinion she wants others to agree with, e.g. "This government is doing something about the violence in our streets")
- the evidence (her ways of proving that the claim is true, e.g. "… because we have just decided to raise the penalties for this type of crime")
- the warrant (the implicit reason why the evidence seems to support the claim, e.g. the assumption that higher penalties reduce crime).

Do the arguments hold water? Why/why not?

Layout (for articles only)

Does the article contain
- a heading, or in newspaper articles a headline (i.e. a title in big, bold letters)
- a lead (an introduction in bold letters giving a brief summary)
- a byline (a line at the top giving the writer's name and sometimes his location)
- a body (a main part written in plain letters)
- middle headings (titles of the various paragraphs)?

How do the headline, lead and middle headings try to catch our attention?

Are there any illustrations, e.g.
- a photo
- a drawing
- a graph
- a fact sheet (information box)?

What is the relation between the illustrations and the text? Is this indicated in a caption? See also "Pictures", p. 331.

Composition, language and **tone**: See "Fiction Texts", p. 323.

Further reading

For more on non-fiction analysis, see the book entitled *On Purpose – Rhetorical Analysis of Non-fiction* by Nanna Flindt Quist or type "Nonfiction Analysis Frame Classzone" in an Internet search engine.

A piece of advice

When analysing a text, picture or film, you do not necessarily have to analyse the various aspects in the order suggested here. Work with these aspects in whatever order makes the most sense in relation to what you are studying and the way you want to present your analysis.

Pictures

Medium

Is the picture
- a photograph
- a drawing
- a painting
- a print
- a collage
- or ...?

What materials have been used?
- For drawings: pen, pencil or ...
- For paintings: oil, watercolours or ...
- For collages: cuttings from newspapers and magazines or ...?

Subject matter

What elements do you see in the picture?

If the picture is figurative, describe the scene it portrays, i.e. the people, creatures, things and landscapes/interiors that are depicted. For example, what are the people doing and what do they look like – and what do their interaction, body language and the direction of their gaze tell us about their relationships?

If the picture is abstract, describe the shapes, lines and colours in it.

Does the title tell us who or what is in the picture?

Space

Does the picture have perspective (depth)? If so, what is in
- the foreground
- the middle ground
- the background?

Or is the picture flat, with no illusion of space and with all the elements appearing to be pasted to the surface?

Angle

Is the scene seen from
- a bird's eye view (i.e. from above)
- a worm's eye view (i.e. from below)
- normal eye-level?

What is the effect of this visual angle?

Composition

Are the elements arranged symmetrically? If so, this will often produce a sense of calmness and order. This is also the case with regular shapes such as squares and circles.

Are the elements placed along a diagonal, i.e. a sloping line more or less linking the opposite corners of the picture? If so, this may create an impression of movement and disorder – as do irregular shapes.

Are any elements placed in the middle of the picture? Such a position increases their importance.

Are any shapes repeated? If so, this tends to create a sense of rhythm and unity.

Do positive shapes, such as objects, dominate the composition – or are there more negative shapes, i.e. voids? Is there a strong contrast between solids and voids?

How is the picture cropped? For instance, have elements been partially left out? How does this focus the viewer on certain aspects?

Light

Is the light harsh or soft?

Is it
- natural light (i.e. from the sky)
- artificial light (i.e. man-made, e.g. from a lamp)
- symbolic light (i.e. from some supernatural source)?

Are some objects more illuminated than others?

What is the effect of this use of light?

Colour

What colours have been used?

Is the colour scheme you see
- many colours or only one or two
- light or dark colours
- warm (reddish, yellowish) or cold (bluish, greenish) colours
- colours in harmony with each other or some that contrast?

What is the effect of this use of colours?

Symbols

Does anything in the picture represent more than itself and have a symbolic meaning?

See also "Symbols" under "Fiction Texts", p. 327.

Theme

What is the general theme of the picture?

How does the title reflect the theme?
See also "Theme" under "Fiction Texts", p. 327.

Message

Are we meant to learn something from the picture?

Further reading

For more aspects to study in pictures, try typing "Visual Arts Vocabulary KQED" in an Internet search engine or search under "How to Write a Picture Analysis Essay" on eHow.com

A piece of advice

When analysing a text, picture or film, do not just point out the various elements in it. Also interpret these elements, i.e. explain their effect and/or their relation to the theme.

Films

Genre

- Is the film (or TV show) fiction or non-fiction, i.e. a documentary?
- If fiction, to which specific genre and subgenre or mixture of genres does the film belong? A fiction film can be placed within a certain genre based on e.g.
  - its setting – such as westerns and war films
  - its theme and mood, e.g. dramas and comedies

Many films are mixtures of genres, for example romantic comedies. For a list of film genres with definitions and examples, see "Film Genres" on Filmsite.org.

Note also that the line between fiction and non-fiction may be blurred. A documentary is the director's version of events presented as he wants them presented.

In addition, some directors consciously mix fact and fiction to create a hybrid between the two, which may be presented as a documentary – some people use the term **docufiction** to describe such a hybrid.

Similarly, a fiction film based on actual events is also the film makers' version of what happened.

See also under "Textual Genres", p. 322.

Composition

A film is divided into

- **scenes**, which are the overall parts of the film. A scene typically takes place in a single location and focuses on a single part of the action. Scenes vary greatly in length, and they are subdivided into
  - **shots**, which are the parts that make up the scenes. A shot is an uninterrupted piece of footage. The move from one shot to another is called a **cut**. A scene typically consists of a number of shots, but it may also contain just one single shot, in which case there are no cuts in the scene.

For more on composition, see "Fiction Texts", p. 323.

Framing

What type of shots are used, i.e. how much of the characters and the surroundings do we see in each shot, and why?

- Does the film use **close-ups**? These typically focus on and show

little more than a person's face or (parts of) an object. If so, what is the effect of this specific focus? Do the close-ups contribute to a feeling of closeness or intimacy – or are they so close (extreme close-ups) that a different effect is achieved?

- Are **long shots** (also called wide shots) used – and if so, to what effect? They present the scene at a distance and may be used to introduce scenery or a city or to give a sense of emotional distancing with regard to the characters.
- Are mainly **medium shots** used? These are the standard shots presenting the scene in a 'normal' shot without excessive closeness. They may allow the viewer to determine what is in the foreground and background.

Angles

From what angle do we see the action, and why?

- For instance, do we watch the action from a normal perspective at the same eye level as the characters? This standard perspective may give a sense of being on the same level as the characters.
- Does the film use high-angle shots, presenting the action from above? Usually, this gives the viewer a sense of overview of the scene and at the same time makes the characters and objects look small.
- Or is the opposite perspective used, i.e. low-angle shots? This may be used to make characters look powerful and/or arrogant.
- Does the film use canted angles with the camera tilted so that people and objects appear slanted? This can give an impression of something being off balance, e.g. a character's mental state.

Camera movement

- Is the camera stationary so that any movement comes only from the characters?
- Or does the camera move around? It may be circling one or more characters, which could give a sense of dizziness, or moving from character to character, e.g. to emphasize a dialogue.
- Is the camera handheld or steady? Normally, it is steady, but if it is handheld, the movement may suggest dizziness, but it could also be used to give the impression of something authentic, of an amateur filming something that is really happening without interference from professional film makers.
- Does the camera follow a character's point of view? Usually, this gives a sense of empathy or simply greater understanding of how that particular character sees the world.
- Does the camera change perspective or angle as we follow its movement? If so, what effect does the movement create? Zooming in on a character or object may, for example, invite the viewer to begin to focus on something new.

Editing

- Are the scenes long – or short with quick cuts to the next scene? The latter can make the action seem fast-paced and dynamic – or even frantic and disorienting.
- Are many or only a few cuts (from one shot to the next) used within each scene? Short cuts could also have a frantic effect.
- How does the film change from scene to scene? Does it simply cut or does it fade or dissolve?
- What are the effects of the way the scenes are edited and the way the film is cut?

Lighting

- Is the lighting high-key (very bright)? This type of lighting can imply lightness and cheerfulness. However, bright light can also be hard with edges emphasized, which may suggest a feeling of (harsh) realism.
- Or is the lighting low-key (darker)? This can be used to suggest seriousness. At the same time this type of light can also be softer and imply a dream-like or romantic quality.
- From what direction does the light come? Side-lighting or lighting from below may be used to suggest something scary or dramatic. A scene fully lit from above gives the viewer a sense of knowing what is going on and not being exposed to sudden surprises.
- Does the use of colour carry significance? Warm and cold colours (see "Pictures" , p. 331) create very different moods.

Sound

- Does the sound come only from the world of the film, in which case the sound is diegetic?
- Or is the sound non-diegetic meaning it comes from outside the world of the film and not from the action? This could be in the form of mood music or a voice-over (a narrator's commentary).

Does the sound come simply from the scene that is shown? Or do we also hear sound from outside the scene thus giving an indication of what is happening elsewhere? In both cases the sound is diegetic.

- If there is mood music, how does it try to make us feel?
- If there is a voice-over, what effects does it create? Does it give us a greater understanding of the characters' inner lives or, conversely, contribute to a feeling of disengagement from the action – of seeing it from the 'outside'? Does it indicate what is going to happen and give a sense of foreshadowing (see "Fiction Texts", p. 323)?

Setting, characters, symbols and other things to consider when analysing a film: see "Fiction Texts", p. 323.

Websites
How to determine their credibility

Source

- Who is behind the website? A private company, a private person, an institution, the authorities, etc.?
- In the address, does the name after *www.* tell you who is behind the website?
- Does the end of the address (the top-level domain) tell you whether the site is commercial (*.com* or the British *.co.uk*), belongs to non-commercial organizations (*.org*)[1], an American university (*.edu*), a British university (*.ac.uk*) or, to include more examples, the American government (*.gov*) or military (*.mil*)? For a full list of Internet top-level domains, see Wikipedia.
- Does the website have an "about" or "FAQ" section which gives information about the site?
- Is it clear who the author is, and what qualifications and authority he/she has to write about the subject?
- Is it clear where the information comes from, e.g. in the form of a list of sources and references?

Contents

- Does the website mostly contain opinion or fact?
- Is there anything that could be seen as political, unfounded or controversial and that you need to consider more carefully before using it?
- Are you able to check and confirm facts that are presented on the site to help establish its credibility?

---

1 *.com* is often used more generally. Likewise, *.org* does not always indicate a non-commercial organization.

Purpose

- Is the site solely meant to provide information? Or does it exist for social/entertainment purposes?
- Or does it also have other (perhaps less obvious) purposes, such as supporting a political view or personal idea – or making money, e.g. by getting as many views as possible to generate money from ads on the site?

Presentation

- Does the site appear professional, or are there spelling mistakes or other mistakes that make you question its reliability? The fact that a site seems professional and well-designed does not in itself make it credible!
- When was the site last updated, is this done regularly and does that affect your view of its credibility?

A note on Wikipedia

The credibility of this popular Internet encyclopedia is often discussed. It is user-based, which means that anyone can edit it, and this has given rise to criticism of its reliability. However, studies have found its English-language edition to be as factually correct as traditional encyclopedias such as the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* – or even more correct.

This may result from the fact that edits are always noticed by other users, and debate arises if changes are seen as wrong or controversial. Accordingly, what is seen by some as the site's weakness may also be its strength. You can see the debates and edit history behind all Wikipedia articles via the "Talk" and "View history" links at the top of the article.

In other words, as long as you maintain a critical approach and use other sources, www.en.wikipedia.org is a perfectly acceptable source of information.