

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? **Who** are the characters?

What happens? **What** is the plot?

Why does this happen?

As you read, find keywords and phrases to help you understand what the text is all about and to help you form a general impression of it. To make a detailed analysis of the text it will be useful to consider the points below. When you identify characteristic features in your analysis, make sure that you explain their effect in your interpretation.



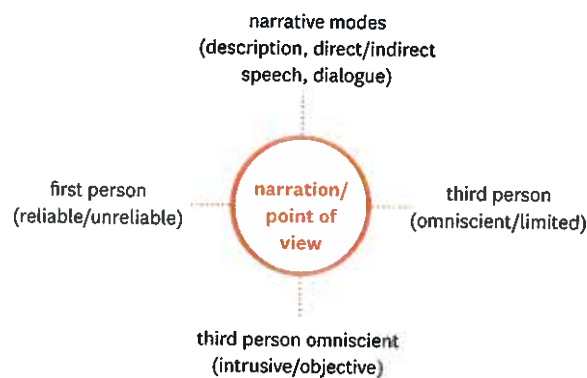
Setting



- 1 Where and when does the text take place? Is it in the real or in an imaginary world?
- 2 Does the place of action remain the same or is there more than one physical setting?
- 3 What time of year or of day is it?
- 4 What information is given about the historical period and context?
- 5 Is there any indication in the text of the social and cultural environment?

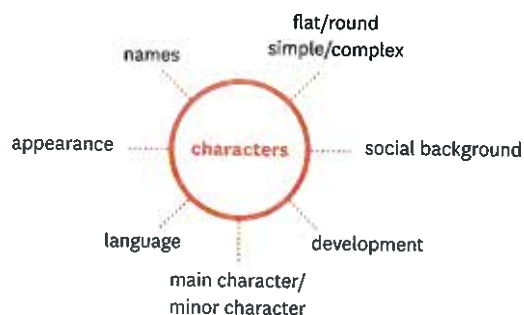
- 6 Is the setting described in detail or hinted at? Is it conveyed through direct description or indirectly by what the characters say or do?
- 7 Does the setting create a particular atmosphere?
- 8 Does the setting reflect a character's mood or underline emotions?
- 9 Does the setting comment on the character in an indirect way?
- 10 Has the setting shaped the character and his/her values?
- 11 Does the setting have symbolic significance in the text?

Narration/point of view



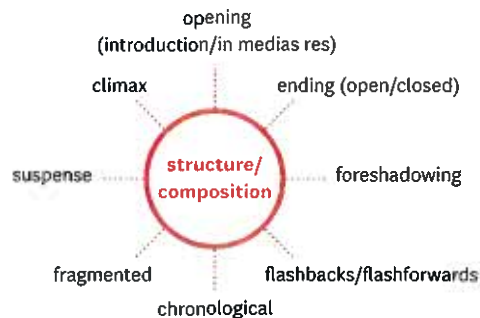
- 1 Is it a first person or a third person narrative?
- 2 If it is a first person narrative, is the narrator reliable or unreliable?
- 3 If it is a third person narrator, is the point of view omniscient or limited? Whose thoughts and feelings do we have access to?
- 4 If it is an omniscient narrator, is the narrator intrusive and comments on characters and actions, or objective?
- 5 Are the characters described directly by the author or indirectly by what they say or do?
- 6 Does the author represent the thoughts of a character as a stream of consciousness? (See Literary terms, p. 50)
- 7 Which narrative modes are used: description, direct/indirect speech, dialogue, report (i.e. an account of what has happened)?
- 8 Does the narrative voice reflect the narrator's personality?

Characters



- 1 Who are the characters, and what do we learn about them? (Age, appearance, family situation, background, education, job, language, thoughts, opinions)
- 2 Are all characters introduced at once, or do they appear gradually?
- 3 Who is the main character? Why do you consider him/her the main character?
- 4 Do the characters' personalities remain the same throughout the story or do they develop?
- 5 What causes this development or change?
- 6 Are the characters flat or round, simple or complex characters?
- 7 Do the characters' names tell us something about their personalities?
- 8 Do the characters' appearances and language tell us something about their personalities or status?

Structure/composition



Opening

- 1 Does the story have an introduction or does it start in medias res?
- 2 How does the writer capture the reader's interest?
- 3 Are important situations presented?
- 4 Are important characters introduced?
- 5 Are central themes introduced?

Ending

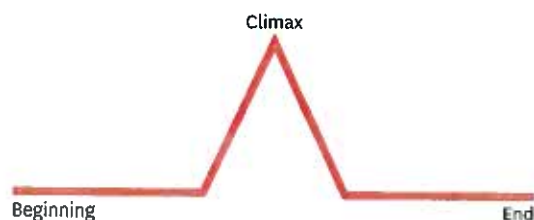
- 1 Does the ending provide some kind of resolution?
- 2 Is it an open and ambiguous ending?
- 3 Is the ending predictable/unpredictable, expected/unexpected?
- 4 What is the effect of the ending on the reader: surprise, astonishment, relief, fulfilment?

Composition

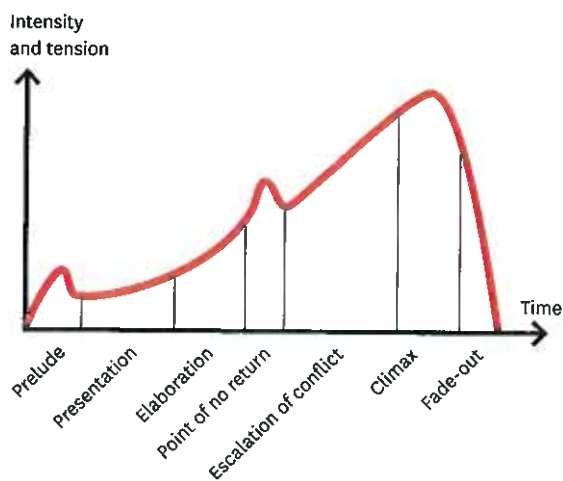
- 1 Are the events presented in chronological order? If not, why not?
- 2 Are there flashbacks or flashforwards?
- 3 Foreshadowing: are there hints at events likely to happen?
- 4 Is it a fragmented narrative?

- 5 What is the initial situation, the development, and the final situation? Will there be any future development?
- 6 Is there a conflict in the story? If yes, does it come from outside or inside?
- 7 What is the relationship between characters and events? Is the protagonist controlled by events or does the protagonist shape events?
- 8 Does the author create a feeling of suspense? If yes, how?
- 9 Is there a climax?
- 10 Can one of the following graphs be used to illustrate the structure of the text?

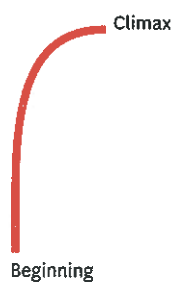
1. PYRAMID PLOT STRUCTURE



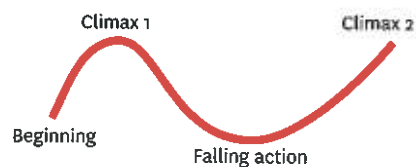
2. THE HOLLYWOOD MODEL



3. GRAPH 3



4. GRAPH 4



Language/style/tone



- 1 Is the sentence structure long or short, simple or complex, paratactic or hypotactic? Are the sentences incomplete?
- 2 Is the vocabulary concrete or abstract, colloquial, formal or neutral? Is a particular word class common in the text? Is there a use of or a lack of adjectives and adverbs? Are specific words or phrases repeated?
- 3 Is there anything characteristic about the punctuation or the word order?
- 4 Does the language belong to a certain dialect or sociolect?
- 5 Are there connotations? Positive or negative?
- 6 Sound effects: are there examples of alliteration or assonance?
- 7 Are there examples of the use of imagery, symbolism, metaphors, simile or personification? (See Literary terms, pp. 47-50)
- 8 What is characteristic of the general tone? Is it positive, negative, neutral, happy, depressed, optimistic, ironic ...?

TITLE

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

THEME

- 1 What subject(s) does the text fundamentally deal with, or what is the main idea of the text?
- 2 Is there more than one theme? If so, what are they?
- 3 Which elements in the story support the theme? Are there elements which oppose the theme?
- 4 Is it an overt or an implied theme?

MESSAGE

- 1 What has the writer tried to tell the reader through the text?
- 2 Does the writer intend to entertain, educate or influence the reader?