

Analysis and interpretation of fiction

Introduction: This guide will help you analyse and interpret works of fiction. This handout is just an overview, you might want to consult *Tools* or *Angles Analysis* (both on lectio) for more information. Remember to always:

- Ask ‘why?’ and ‘what is the effect?’ (e.g., What is the effect of a second person narrator?).
- Support your analysis with specific examples (quotations).
- Focus on the most significant analytical elements for the text in question.

1. Genre

What type of text are you reading?

- Short story, novel, play, graphic novel, etc.

2. Setting

Where and when do the events take place? How does the setting affect the characters and plot?

- **Time period** (historical era, season, time of day)
- **Location** (country, urban/rural, specific places)
- **Social environment** (cultural norms, social class)

3. Characterization

Understanding the characters,

- **External characteristics/traits:** appearance, age, background, speech patterns, actions.
- **Internal characteristics/traits:** personality, values, desires, fears.
- How are these traits revealed? (dialogue, thoughts, actions, or descriptions).

Character development

- How do characters change throughout the story? (if they change)
- What causes these changes?

Character types

- **Round characters:** Complex, multi-dimensional, like real people.
- **Flat characters:** Simple, one-dimensional, defined by few characteristics.
- **Dynamic characters:** Change significantly during the story.
- **Static characters:** Remain essentially the same.

4. Conflicts

Conflict drives the story forward and reveals character.

Types of conflicts:

- **Internal:** Within a character’s mind (desires, values, choices)
- **External:** Between characters or between a character and:
 - Other people (interpersonal)
 - Society (social norms, laws, institutions)
 - Nature (survival, natural disasters)
 - Technology (control, dependence)
- Ask yourself: How do conflicts develop? Are they resolved? How are they resolved? And what do we learn about the characters from these conflicts?

5. Types of narrator/point of view

Who tells the story? And how does this influence our understanding?

- **First person narrator** (using pronouns like *I*, *me*, *we*, and *us*)
- **Second person narrator** (using *you*, *your* or *yours*)
- **Third person narrator** (using *he*, *she*, *they*)
 - **Omniscient:** Narrator knows all characters' thoughts
 - **Limited/subjective:** Restricted to one character’s perspective
 - **Objective:** With an entirely external view, like a camera

Reliability of the narrator

- Is the narrator trustworthy?
- Does the narrator have limited information or understanding?
- Does the narrator have reasons to distort the truth?

6. Structure and composition

How is the text structured?

- **Chronological order** (events in time order)
- **Non-chronological story** (flashbacks, flash-forwards or multiple timelines)
- Does the author use **Foreshadowing** (suggesting future events before they occur) or **false foreshadowing** (suggesting future events that end up not happening, but they still create suspense)?
- Does it start **in medias res**? (starting in the middle of the action)
- Does it end with an **open** or **closed ending**?
- Does the text contain any **plot twists**?

Is the story structured in one of these patterns?

- **Circular composition** (home-away-home structure)
- **Classic suspense curve** (The Hollywood Model: exposition → rising action → climax → falling action → resolution).

7. Tone and atmosphere

- What mood or feeling does the text create?
- How does the author establish this atmosphere?

8. Language/Style

- Is the language:
 - **Formality**: Formal vs. informal (colloquial, slang)
 - **Descriptive vs. minimalist** writing
 - **Simple vs. complex sentence structures**
 - **Word choice**: Does the author use many verbs/adjectives/adverbs, and what is the effect of this?
- What type of English is used? And what are the connotations ('associations') of this kind of English
 - **Standard English? Another variety of English?**
 - **A sociolect?** (Language influenced by a certain social class)
 - **A dialect?** (Language influenced by a certain region)

9. Literary devices

- **Similes**: comparisons using an image and words like *as* or *like*. E.g., she is like a rose.
- **Metaphors**: comparisons using an image, but without *as* or *like*. E.g., she is a rose.
- **Imagery**: Language that appeals to the senses. E.g. The rusty, squeaking swing set shuddered in the bitter wind.
- **Personification**: the attribution of a human characteristics to something non-human. E.g. the rose smiled.
- **Symbols** (objects or actions representing abstract ideas)
- **Repetition** (for more: *Angles Analysis, Tools*, and the handout *Analysis and interpretation of non-fiction*).

10 Theme(s) and message

- **Theme(s)**: The central ideas or concepts explored in the text (e.g., growing up, love, identity, prejudice, searching for your identity).
 - How does the text deal with this theme?
- **Message(s)**: (budskab): What is the text trying to teach us?

11. Title

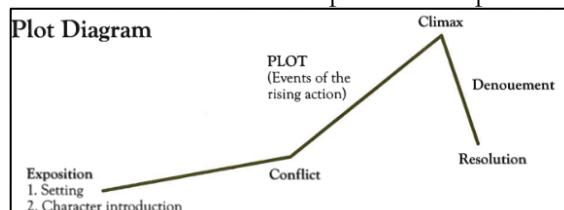
- What is the title? Is it useful for analysing the text? Is it ironic?

12. Relate

- How does this text relate to others in the same theme? Are there similar themes or conflicts?

The Hollywood model explained

The plot can typically be described in a plot diagram, a pyramid graph. The plot starts on the left and ends on the right. The top of the pyramid shows the most intense point in the plot.



The five elements of the plot (example: Little Red Riding Hood)

1. The exposition (beginning)
 - a. In which the elements of the text are presented (or exposed). The **characters**, the setting (**time** and place etc.), and the basic conflict are presented.
 - b. *Once upon a time there was a dear little girl who was loved by everyone who looked at her, but most of all by her grandmother, and there was nothing that she would not have given to the child.*
2. Rising action
 - a. Events start to happen, and the plot unfolds. **The main character (protagonist) acts**, but usually **something disturbs the course of action**.
 - b. *'I will take great care', said Little Red Riding Hood to her mother, and gave her hand on it. The grandmother lived out in the wood, half a league from the village, and just as Little Riding Hood entered the wood, a wolf met her.*
3. The climax
 - a. After a series of **elements of rising action**, the build-up to climax is so intense that the **conflict is exposed openly**, and a line is crossed from which there is no turning back. The story has reached a **point of no return**.
 - b. *'Who is there?' Little Red Riding Hood,' replied the wolf. 'She is bringing cake and wine; open the door.' 'Lift the latch,' called out the grandmother, 'I am too weak, and cannot get up.' The wolf lifted the latch, the door sprang open, and without saying a word he went straight to the grandmother's bed and devoured her. 'All the better to eat you with'. And scarcely had the wolf said this, than with one bound he was out of bed and swallowed up Red Riding Hood.*
4. Falling action (denouement)
 - a. After the peak conflict at the climax, the intensity grows smaller and a **development towards a new state of affairs takes place**. There may be doubt about the outcome of the conflict, about who has 'won' and gets to define the terms of the new situation. During the phase of falling action, the story works its way to the conclusion. In short stories this phase may be very short, leaving the interpretation of the outcome of the conflict to the reader.
 - b. *The huntsman was just passing the house and thought to himself: 'How the old woman is snoring! I must just see if she wants anything.' So he went into the room, and when he came to the bed, he saw that the wolf was lying in it. 'Do I find you here, your old sinner!' said he. 'I have long sought you!' But just as he was going to fire at him, it occurred to him that the wolf might have devoured the grandmother, and that she might still be saved, so he did not fire, but took a pair of scissors, and began to cut open the stomach of the sleeping wolf.*
5. Resolution
 - a. At the end of the story, the conflicts and complexities of the plot are resolved. Once the conflicts are resolved a new state of normality is created for the characters, and the reader of the text experience a release of tension. The resolution is often a happy ending, but it may also be the opposite – the suggestion of disaster because of an unresolved conflict.
 - b. *Then all three were delighted. The huntsman drew off the wolf's skin and went home with it; the grandmother ate the cake and drank the wine which Red Riding Hood had brought and revived. But Red Riding Hood thought to herself: 'As long as I live, I will never leave the path by myself to run into the wood, when my mother has forbidden me to do so.'*