

Reading and Writing

About Fiction



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If you are asked to write a critical paper about a short story or a novel, the following questions may help you select a focus for your efforts. As with all expository writing, you should organize your paper around a central focus or thesis—perhaps some statement of the story's meaning, or an explanation of the function of a series of symbols or metaphors, or some evaluative statements about the work's effectiveness. Consider these elements in your analysis and choose those that apply to the particular story you are analyzing.

Plot

- What happens in the story?
- Is the plot one of external action or is it based on a conflict (decision) within a character? Is it rapid in pace, suspenseful? What makes it so?
- Does the action build to a climax or sharp turning point?
- What conflicts can you identify? Are the conflicts resolved? If so, how are they resolved?
- Are there also minor conflicts? How are these related to the whole? How does the conflict reveal character? Theme?
- In what order are the events arranged? Why are they arranged in this way?
- Is the ending logical, inevitable? Is the ending a surprise?

Character

- Is there a chief character that can be called a protagonist? Is one an antagonist?
- What role do minor characters play?
- What are the characters' most striking traits? Are the characters lifelike? Are they stereotypes? Representatives of a group? Symbols?
- Do the characters change or grow, or are they static?
- Are the characters portrayed sympathetically?
- Are the characters revealed directly or indirectly?
- Are characters exaggerated or caricatured?
- How do the characters interact with one another?
- What motivates the characters?
- What methods are used to reveal the characters—their speech and actions, author's comments, actions and comments of other characters? Do they achieve an epiphany (a sudden revelation of truth)?

Setting

- Where and when is the story set?
- How important (influential on plot and characters) is the setting?
- How does the author paint the scene? Why is the story set here?
- What details of the setting become symbolic?
- In what time does the story occur? Why is this significant?
- How is the passage of time perceived?
- What is the social environment? How does it affect the theme, characters, and tone?
- What is the atmosphere of the setting? What effect is generated by it?

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Point of View

- From what viewpoint is the story told? Is the story told by an anonymous third-person narrator or by a character who uses first-person (*I* or *we*) point of view?
- If using first-person point of view, is the first-person narrator trustworthy? Is the narrator participating in the action or just witnessing the story's events?
- Does the point of view change?
- What effects result from the chosen point of view? Is it objective or subjective?
- How would a different point of view change the story?

Structure

- What is the author's narrative method?
- Does the story build through a sequence of steps or scenes? Is it chronological?
- Is the story told in flashback or reminiscence?
- Is the story told through straight narration or through dialogue?

Style, Tone, Language, Imagery, and Symbols

- Is the style simple or complex?
- Is the tone intimate or distant?
- Is the author serious, humorous, or satiric in attitude toward characters and events? How do you know this?
- If irony is used, is it verbal? Dramatic? Situational? Other?
- What kind of imagery is used? What kinds of details are chosen (ugly, grim, beautiful, etc.)?
- What sentence structures and words are used to achieve specific effects?
- Is the language compelling? Energetic?
- Is the level of diction formal or informal?
- What kind of symbols does the author use? Are there any objects or events that have special significance or have hidden meanings?

Theme

- What is the central theme or themes of the story?
- What issue does this story deal with (coming of age, love, death, coping with change, etc.)?
- What does the story reveal and say about these issues?
- Are there social or moral implications? Does it help us understand ourselves and others psychologically?
- What in the story supports or develops this theme?