

# Short Story Analysis

By analyzing a short story, a reader more deeply understands the relationships between the parts, or elements, of the story and how these parts shape the story itself. Reading critically means to evaluate the ideas and meanings in the text and make connections between them based on evidence from the story. To write a clever literary analysis, first understand literary elements/devices/techniques and how they factor into a short story's analysis. Following that, critically read and analyze the short story. Then start writing your essay.

**Literary Elements** are the essential elements that build a short story's framework. They are the fundamental building blocks upon which the story is written. They answer the basic questions of who, what, when, why, and how of the story. Without them, the story is incomplete. *The Norton Introduction to Literature* (shorter 14<sup>th</sup> edition) describes the following as literary elements:

- **Plot** is the sequence of events. What happens first? How will this turn out? Parts of the plot are:
  - Exposition
  - Rising action
  - Climax (turning point)
  - Falling action
  - Conclusion
- **Narration/Point of View** gives the reader a specific angle or perspective from which to view characters, events, and any other components of the story.
  - With this element, the reader decides if the narrator/point of view is reliable, unreliable, omniscient, objective, or neutral.
  - The most common types of narration are in 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, or 3<sup>rd</sup> person viewpoint.
- **Characterization** defines the characters in the story. Who are they? Describe them, their relationships, connections, worldviews, and ideas about themselves and others. Types of characters in a short story can be:
  - Antagonist vs. protagonist
  - Flat vs. round characters
  - Static vs. dynamic characters
  - Major or minor characters
  - Stock vs. archetypes
- **Setting** informs the reader where and when the story occurs.
  - Setting decides the mood, situation, and outlook of the characters. Setting helps to explain reasons for the characters' specific personalities, outlooks, and values.
  - Analyzing the setting helps the reader understand the plot from larger historical, social, or universal perspectives.
- **Symbolism/Figurative Language:** A symbol is one item that represents another item. It is usually hinted at often through the text. Figurative language takes the literal meaning of a symbol and replaces it with a more imaginative approach that connects to our ideas and senses. Figures of speech can include:
  - Allegory
  - Allusion
  - Irony
  - Metaphor
  - Oxymoron
  - Personification
  - Simile
  - Symbol
  - Synecdoche
- **Theme** is the author's overall message to the audience, like the main idea of the story. Readers can ask themselves, "Why does it all matter? What does the story teach or reveal? What is the universal lesson we all learn?"
  - Theme is a general idea portrayed by the characters, plot, or setting unique to the story.
  - Theme is a general insight portrayed by these elements rather than a specific insight about any one of them.

**Literary Devices/Techniques** are tools that add more interest to a short story. Each device has unique purposes and enriches a short story by adding color, depth, and emotion.

- Literary devices are more specific techniques that create effects and enhance the language.
- Literary techniques are broader strategies that reveal the ideas of a story and enhance its impact.
- Some of the better-known literary devices/techniques are:
  - Allegory
  - Conflict
  - Foreshadowing
  - Imagery
  - Irony
  - Metaphor/simile
  - Mood/Tone
  - Personification
  - Symbolism

**Read the Text/Form a Thesis.** After you understand literary elements and devices, the next step is to read the text. While reading, allow enough time to complete the following steps:

- Preview, actively read, and review the text, underlining and noting connections, patterns, or questions raised in the story that seem significant to the story.
- Use notes and thought-provoking questions, including arguments and connections made, to formulate a thesis (Topic + Theme + Elements) that you will prove to the reader. Ask a major question about the story and then answer it, using your thesis statement.
- Reexamine the thesis for logical reasoning, complexity, and originality. Ask yourself, “Does it have a clear topic, theme, and literary elements used to support the theme?”

**Form a Literary Analysis Outline.** For further reference, see our Writing Center handouts, “How to Write a Thesis Statement,” “Thesis Statement Types & Models,” and “Essay Development,” and any of our handouts on MLA formatting.

- Create an outline by organizing examples that support the thesis arguments (along with analysis and interpretation of these) into paragraphs.
- Compose a rough draft, following MLA guidelines, including a Works Cited page. See our handouts on “Essay Development” and any MLA handouts.
- Revise, revise, and revise. Edit and proofread.
- A barebones outline of the short story follows if your professor does not provide one. See our Writing Center handouts mentioned above for further reference:

**Introduction:**

- Hook
- Background Information
- Thesis = Topic + Theme + Elements. Example: Nathaniel Hawthorne’s story “The Birth-Mark” illustrates the destructive powers of perfectionism through the author’s adept use of symbolism and foreshadowing.

**Body Paragraphs Using PIE:**

- (P) Point: Topic Sentence = Transitional Words + Topic + Theme + One Element.
- (I) Illustration: Quote from the short story.
- (E) Explanation: If you have trouble explaining, ask yourself these questions: Why did I use the quote above to support my theme? What does the quote mean? How does the quote support my thesis?

**Conclusion:**

- Restate the thesis (Say it in different words.).
- Sum up the literary elements/devices/techniques used, linking them to the thesis and overall theme.
- Leave the reader with a big, bold idea about the theme’s take-away.