

HOW TO READ A NARRATIVE

In order to understand and be affected by a story, you should –

Answer the following questions about **character**:

- Who is the **protagonist**?
- What is his or her situation?
- Is the protagonist's main struggle **internal** or **external**?
- What are all the obstacles in the protagonist's way?
- What are the protagonist's **personality traits**?
 - Proclivities (talents and tendencies)
 - Idiosyncrasies (unusual quirks)
 - Habits or addictions (smoking, drinking, gambling, cleaning, etc...)
 - Wounds (previous emotional injuries)
 - Values
 - Desires
- What are the personality traits of the other characters, and how do they play out in contrast? Is there a character that functions as a **foil**?
- What are the protagonist's **physical traits**?
 - Age
 - Gender
 - Race
 - Size
 - Gait – fast, slow, quirky?
 - Manner of speech –
 - Diction
 - Syntax
 - Meter (rhythm)
 - Tone (attitude)
 - Favorite catchphrase
- What are the physical traits of the **antagonist**, the **foil(s)** and all **secondary characters**?
- How do the traits of the characters affect their **choices** and hence the **plot**?
- What would you do differently if you were in any of the character's shoes?
- Which character's shoes would you rather be in?

Answer the following questions about **plot**:

- Where does the **set-up** end and the **rising action** begin?
- Is there **foreshadowing**, which is a small, hidden clue early on that hints at what might happen later?
- Are there **flashbacks**, which are temporary shifts to the past that provide information about the present?
- Is there **dramatic irony**, which is when the audience knows something the characters don't?
- Is there **situational irony**, which is when a character takes a surprising turn, for example, when a cop lands behind bars or a dropout opens a school?
- What and where are all the surprising plot twists and turns?
- What is the **climax** of the story?
- How would you rewrite the **resolution, or denouement**?

Answer the following questions about **setting**:

- **When** and **where** does this story take place?
- Why do you think the author choose this particular setting?
- How does the setting affect the characters?
- How does the setting affect the plot?
- What would the story be like if it were in another setting?
- How different is this place from where you have been in your lifetime?

Answer the following questions about **point of view**:

- What is the **point of view**?
 - First person “I”
 - Second person “You” (rare)
 - Third person objective (no thoughts or feelings, only words and actions)
 - Third person limited (only the protagonist’s thoughts and feelings)
 - Third person omniscient (thoughts and feelings of all the characters as though the narrator were a god-like creature who could see inside the minds and hearts of everyone)
- Does the point of view switch, and, if so, why?
- How does the point of view affect the story?
- How would the story be different if it were written from a different point of view?
- Re-write the first or last paragraph to find out.

Answer the following questions about **sensory details** (scientific and clear):

- How descriptive is the author? Is the description clear, specific and detailed?
- Does the author use **figurative language**?

Answer the following questions about **imagery** (impressionistic):

- Does the author paint a vivid picture in your mind, but you don’t know why? What individual words or chunks of words help to create that picture?

Answer the following questions about **symbolism**:

- Are there recurring **motifs**, or themes, that carry significance?
- Are there any **symbols**, or concrete objects that represent abstract ideas, like a bird or a boat or a color?

Answer the following questions about **syntax**:

- How are the author’s sentences? Long and labyrinthine? Short and brusque?
- Are the author’s words in an atypical order, and, if so, why?
- Do you like the sound and flow of the text when it is read aloud?
- How does the author’s syntax affect your sensibilities – how does it make you feel?

Answer the following questions about **diction**:

- Does the author use academic words that you have to look up in a dictionary?
- Does the author use a **non-standard vernacular**?
- Does the author make up his or her own words?
- How do the words make you feel?

Answer the following questions about **tone**:

- What is the author's attitude toward the subject matter, the characters, the story and/or the reader?
 - Serious
 - Hostile
 - Apathetic
 - Melancholic
 - Adoring
 - Other
- How does the diction contribute to the **tone**?
 - List the **denotations** (explicit meanings) and **connotations** (associated meanings) of key words.
- Rewrite a section of the text in order to establish a different tone.

Answer the following questions about **theme**:

- What is the author's message in one sentence? What universal life lesson are you, the reader, meant to learn, which is often the same lesson the protagonist learns?
- What are the sub-themes or additional messages or lessons?

Answer the following questions about **historical context**:

- When was this story written, and is that significant?
- Is the setting of authorship different from the setting of the story?
- Would this story be written now, and, if so, how might it be different?
- *Why* did the author write this story, i.e., what was/is the **author's purpose**?

Answer the following questions about how the story **relates to your life**:

- Do you have anything in common with the protagonist?
- Do you have anything in common with the antagonist?
- Which character(s) are you most like?
- Have you experienced any situations like those mentioned in the story?
- If you were ever in a similar situation to any of the characters in the story, did you behave in much the same way, or did you make different choices and hence experience a different outcome?
- The story has a message. Have you heard this message before?
- Does this story make you want to change, in any way, the way you live your life?

Answer the following questions about how the story **relates to another text** you have read:

- Does this story remind you of another story, play or movie, and, if so, how?

Answer the following questions about how the story **relates to the world**:

- Are there any crises or conflicts in the world that this story reminds you of?
- Does this story want to make you effect social change in any way?

Engage in one or more of these extension activities to reinforce your learning:

- Write down at least ten newly learned **vocabulary words** and their definitions.
- Write one or more of the scenes in **screenplay** format.
- Write a **song** to be sung by one or more of the characters.
- Draw a **storyboard** of the entire text.
- Divine other creative tasks that help you further appreciate the text.