

Elements of a Short Story

1. Setting:

The **setting** of a work of fiction establishes its historical, geographical, and physical location. Where a work is set – on a tropical island, in a dungeon, at a crowded party, in a tent in the woods – influences our interpretation of the story's events and characters. When a work takes place – during the French Revolution, during the Vietnam War, today, or in the future – is equally important. Setting, however, is more than just approximate time and place in which the work is set; setting also encompasses a wide variety of physical and cultural elements.

Historical Setting: A particular historical period and the events associated with it, can be important in a story; therefore, some familiarity with a period can be useful. Knowing the approximate year or historical period during which a story takes place can explain forces that act on characters, help to account and help to justify a writer's use of plot devices that might otherwise seem unlikely.

Geographical Setting: Knowing whether a story is set in the United States, in Europe, or in a developing nation can help to explain anything from why language and customs are unfamiliar to us to why characters act in ways we find unlikely. Even in stories set in our own country, regional differences may account for differences in plot development and characters' motivation.

Physical Setting: The time of day, weather, and an outdoor or indoor setting can influence a story's mood, atmosphere and development. The atmosphere that is created in a story can reflect a character's depression, whereas an idyllic, peaceful atmosphere can express a character's joy. A story's atmosphere may also influence the characters' reactions or state of mind, causing them to react one way in a crowded, busy, hectic atmosphere but to react very differently in a peaceful rural atmosphere.

Writing about Setting Checklist:

- Is the setting specified or unidentified? Is it fully described or just sketched in?
- Is the setting just background, or is it a key force in the story?
- How does the setting influence the characters? Does it affect (or reflect) their emotional state? Does it help to explain their motivation?
- Are any characters in conflict with their environment?
- Are any situations set in sharp contrast to the setting?
- How does the setting influence the story's plot? Does it cause characters to act?
- Does the setting add irony to the story?
- In what time period does the story take place? How can you tell? What social, political, or economic characteristics of the historical period might influence the story?
- In what geographical location is the story set? Is this location important to the development of the story?
- At what time of day is the story set? Is time important to the development of the story?
- Is the story set primarily indoors or out-of-doors? What role does this aspect of the setting play in the story?
- What role do weather conditions play in the story?
- Is the story's general atmosphere dark or bright? Clear or murky? Tumultuous or calm? Gloomy or cheerful?

- Does the atmosphere change as the story progresses? Is this change significant?

2. Character:

A **character** is a fictional representation of a person- usually (but not necessarily) a psychologically realistic depiction. **Characterization** is the way writers develop characters and reveal those characters' traits to readers.

Round & Flat Characters: A round character is well developed, closely involved and responsive to the action. A flat character is barely developed or stereotypical. In an effective story, the major characters will usually be complex and fully developed; if they are not, readers will not care what happens to them.

Dynamic and Static Characters: Dynamic characters grow and change in the course of a story, developing as they react to events and to other characters. A static character may face the same challenges a dynamic character might face but will remain essentially unchanged: a static character who was selfish and arrogant will remain selfish and arrogant, regardless of the nature of the story's conflict.

Motivation: What is important is not whether we approve of a character's actions but where those actions are plausible – whether the actions make sense in light of what we know about the character. We need to see a character's motivation – the reasons behind his or her behaviour or we will not believe or accept that behaviour.

Writing about Character Checklist:

- Who is the story's protagonist? Who is the antagonist? Who are the other major characters?
- Who are the minor characters? What roles do they play in the story? How would the story be different without them?
- What do the major characters look like? Is their physical appearance important?
- What are the major characters' most noticeable traits?
- What are the major characters' likes and dislikes? Their strengths and weaknesses?
- What are we told about the major characters' backgrounds and prior experiences? What can we infer?
- Are characters developed for the most part through the narrator's comments and descriptions or through the characters' actions and dialogue.?
- Are the characters round or flat?
- Are the characters dynamic or static?
- Do the characters act in a way that is consistent with how readers expect them to act?
- With which characters are readers likely to be most (and least) sympathetic?

3. Plot:

Plot is the way in which a story's events are arranged; it is shaped by causal connections – historical, social, and personal – by the interaction between characters, and by the juxtaposition of events.

Conflict: Readers' interest and involvement are heightened by a story's conflict, the struggle between opposing forces that emerges as the action develops. This conflict is a clash between the **protagonist**, a story's principal character, and an **antagonist**, someone or something presented in opposition to the protagonist.

Stages of Plot: In a story's **exposition** the writer presents the basic information readers need to understand the events that follows. Typically, the exposition sets the story in motion: it establishes the scene, introduces the major characters, and perhaps suggests the major events or conflicts to come. A **crisis** is a peak in the story's action, a moment of considerable tension or importance; the **climax** is the point of greatest tension or importance, the scene that presents a story's decisive action or event. The final stage of plot, the **resolution**, or **denouement** (French for "untying the knot"), draws the action to a close and accounts for all remaining loose ends.

Order & Sequence: A writer may present a story's events in strict chronological order, with each event presented in the sequence in which it actually took place. More often, however, especially in relatively modern fiction, writers do not present events chronologically. Instead, they present incidents out of expected order, or in no apparent order. For example, a writer may choose to begin **in medias res** (Latin for "in the midst of things"), starting with a key event and later going back in time to explain events that preceded it. Writers who wish to depart from strict chronological order use flashbacks and foreshadowing. A **flashback** moves out of sequence to examine an event or situation that occurred before the time in which the story's action takes place. **Foreshadowing** is the introduction early in a story of situations, events, characters, or objects that hint at things to come.

Writing about Plot Checklist:

- ➔ What happens in the story?
- ➔ Where does the story's formal exposition section end? What do readers learn about characters in this section? What do readers learn about setting? What possible conflicts are suggested here?
- ➔ What is the story's central conflict? What other conflicts are presented? Who is the protagonist? Who (or what) serves as the antagonist?
- ➔ Identify the story's crisis or crises?
- ➔ Identify the story's climax?
- ➔ How is the story's central conflict resolved? Is this resolution plausible? Satisfying?
- ➔ Which portion of the story constitutes resolution? Do any problems remain unresolved? Does any uncertainty remain? If so, does this uncertainty strengthen or weaken the story? Would another ending be more effective?
- ➔ How are the story's events arranged? Are they presented in chronological order? What events are presented out of logical sequence? Does the story use foreshadowing? Flashback? Are the causal connections between events clear? Logical? If not, can you explain why?

4. Point of View:

The angle or vantage point from which the events of a story are presented is known as the **point of view**. The narrator of a work of fiction is not the same as the author – even when a writer uses the first person I. Writers create narrators, often with personalities and opinions far different from theirs, to tell their stories. (The technical term *persona* – which literally means "mask" – is used to denote this narrator).

First-Person Narrator: Sometimes the narrator is a character who uses the first person I (or sometimes we) to tell the story. Often this narrator is a major character. A major advantage of first-person narrators is that their restricted view can create **irony** – a discrepancy between what is said and what readers believe to be true. **Dramatic irony** occurs when a narrator or character

perceives less than readers do. **Situational irony** occurs when what happens is at odds with what readers are led to expect; **verbal irony** occurs when the narrator says one thing but actually means another.

Unreliable Narrators: These types of narrators misrepresent events and misdirect readers. These first-person narrators may be self-serving, mistaken, confused, unstable, or even mad.

Third-Person Narrator: Writers can also use third-person narrators who are not characters in the story. These narrators fall into three categories: omniscient, limited omniscient and objective.

Omniscient: Some third-person narrators are omniscient (all-knowing) narrators, moving at will from one character's mind to another. One advantage of omniscient narrators is that they are objective; they have none of the dishonesty, gullibility, or mental instability that can characterize first-person narrators. Their perception is not limited to what any one character can observe or comprehend.

Limited Omniscient: This type of third-person narration restricts focus to a single character.

Objective: This type of third-person narration simply reports the dialogue and the actions of characters.

Writing about Point Of View Checklist:

- What is the dominant point of view from which the story is told?
- Is the narrator of the story a participant in the story or just a witness?
- Does the story's point of view create irony?
- If the story has a first-person narrator, is the narrative reliable or unreliable? Are there any inconsistencies in the narrator's presentation of their story?
- How do you explain any distortions of fact that you detect? Do you think these distortions are intentional or unintentional?
- If the story has a third-person narrator, is he or she omniscient? Does he or she have limited omniscience? Is the narrator objective?
- What are the advantages of their story's point of view? How does the point of view accomplish the author's purpose?
- Does the point of view remain consistent throughout the story, or does it shift?
- How might a different point of view change the story?

5. Theme:

The **theme** of a work of literature is its central or dominant idea. Theme is not the same as plot or subject.

Interpreting Themes: Different readers may see different themes in a story, but your interpretation of a theme must make sense in light of what is actually in the story. Evidence from the work, not just your own feelings or assumptions, must support your interpretation, and a single symbol or one statement by a character is not enough in itself to reveal a story's theme.

Identifying Themes: Every element of a story can shed light on its themes. As you analyze a short story, look for features that reveal and reinforce what you perceive to be the story's most important ideas.

Writing About Themes Checklist:

- What is the central theme of the story?
- What other themes can you identify?
- Does the title of the story suggest a theme?
- Does the narrator, or any character, make statements that express or imply a theme?
- In what way does the arrangement of events in the story suggest a theme?
- In what way does the central conflict of the story suggest a theme?
- How does the point of view shed light on the story's central theme?
- Do any symbols suggest theme?
- Do any characters in the story change in any significant way? Do their changes convey a particular theme?
- Have you clearly identified the story's central theme, rather than just summarized the plot or stated the subject?
- Does your statement of the story's central theme make a general observation, that has an application beyond the story itself?

6. Style, Tone and Language:

One of the qualities that gives a work of literature its individual personality is its **style**, the way in which a writer selects and arranges words to say what he or she wants to say. Style encompasses elements such as word choice; syntax; sentence length and structure; and the presence, frequency, and prominence of imagery and figures of speech. Closely related to style is **tone**, the attitude of the narrator or author of a work toward the subject matter, characters or audience.

Level of Diction: The level of diction – how formal or informal a story's **language** is – can suggest a good deal about those who use the language, this providing insights into the story's theme.

Formal: Formal diction is characterized by elaborate, complex sentence; a learned vocabulary; and a serious, objective, detached tone.

Informal: Informal diction, consistent with everyday speech, is characterized by slang, contractions, colloquial expressions like "you know what I mean", shortened words forms, incomplete sentences, and a casual, conversational tone.

Imagery and Figurative Language: Imagery – words and phrases that describe what is seen, heard, smelled, tasted, or touched – can have significant impact in a story. By using **metaphors** and **similes** – figures of speech that compare two dissimilar items – writers can indicate a particular attitude toward characters and events. **Personification** is a figure of speech, closely related to metaphor, that assigns inanimate objects or abstract ideas with life or with human characteristics. **Allusions** are references to familiar historical or literary persons or events.

Writing about Style, Tone and Language Checklist:

- Is the story's tone intimate? Distant? Ironic? How does the tone advance the writer's purpose?
- Does the writer make any unusual creative use of diction, word order, or sentence structure?
- Does the style emphasize the sound and rhythm of language? For example, does the writer use alliteration and assonance? Repetition and parallelism? What do such techniques add to the story?
- Is the level of diction generally formal, informal, or somewhere in between?
- Is there a difference between the style of the narrator and the style of the characters' speech? If so, what is the effect of this difference?
- Do any of the story's characters use regionalisms, colloquial language, or nonstandard speech? If so, what effect does this language have?
- What do different characters' levels of diction reveal about them?
- What kind of imagery predominates? Where, and why, is imagery used?
- Does the story develop a pattern of imagery? How does this pattern of imagery relate to the story's themes?
- Does the story use simile and metaphor? Personification? What is the effect of these figures of speech?
- Do figures of speech reinforce the story's themes? Reveal details about characters?
- Does the story make historical, literary, or biblical allusions? What do these allusions contribute to the story?
- What unfamiliar, obscure, or foreign words, phrases, or images are used in the story? What is the effect of these words or expressions?