WRITING ABOUT FICTION

by

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THINK CRITICALLY AND ANALYZE

Your job in writing about literature is to uncover the author’s message (theme(s) of the work) and analyze how that message was produced by the arrangement of words on the page. Remember that any author begins with a blank page. The choice of words and their layout are not random.
CONSIDER YOUR AUDIENCE

In an academic setting, your audience is your teacher. What is the teacher asking of you? Is there a specific focus? Is there a specific theme in the overall course?
The biggest pitfall in writing about literature is giving only plot summary. You are not preparing a “book report.” Remember, your teacher has read the literary work. He or she does not need to be told what happened in the book, except as it relates to your analysis. Let your points dictate the arrangement of your paper, not the sequential events in the plot.
TOOLS OF WRITING

Just as a carpenter uses hammer, saw, nails, etc., a writer uses certain accepted tools to create a literary work. Your paper should separate and analyze these tools, all for the purpose of understanding what the overall theme (message) is. You may choose to analyze one, two or all of the following tools:
• SETTING
• POINT OF VIEW
• PLOT
• CHARACTER
Setting has to do with time and space. Where is it? When is it? If you took the story line from a Western and reset it in New York City in 1995, it would become a completely different story. How is the setting an essential tool in creating the theme? Ask yourself:
• What are the physical surroundings, both natural and man-made?
  Is it dry and dusty? When does the wind blow and why? Does water play an important role? What are the building like and why?

• How are the surroundings described?
  Does the author dedicate pages to describing nature/buildings/rooms, etc.? If so, these things are emphasized for a reason.

• Are inanimate objects given meaning or character?
  Think about the volleyball in Castaway. Sometimes something that is not alive becomes a main character.

• What era of time is the novel placed in and how does the setting affect the events?
  A story about poor coal mining town in England in 1920 will differ from one in a palace in Russia 1845.
• What is the social structure?
  Does the story focus on a family? A community? A company? An Individual?

• What are the economic conditions?
  Is it high society? A poor farming town? An urban Ghetto?

• How is the power distributed?

• What are the ethics of the time?
  What sort of society is it and what do they believe? What is seen as good? As bad?
It is not enough to merely answer these questions. Ask yourself “why?” Remember, the author could have written about anything, anywhere. Why this setting? Why this societal make-up? Why this power structure? When answering these questions, always keep the author’s theme in mind. What is the author wanting to communicate through these choices? Some of these answers might be found in researching about the author’s life. The literary work will be around long after the author is not. Why did the author choose to leave this particular piece of writing behind? What message did he or she want to make immortal?
POINT OF VIEW

This is a term used to describe the way the actions of a story are reported to the reader. Usually there is one character that provides the eyes and ears of the story. The perspective of the protagonist towards the details of the story determines what information is given, in what order, with what emphasis and with what tone.
Novels are sometimes in the first person (“I”). First person places severe limitations. That person must be present in every occurrence in the story. This device was obviously chosen on purpose and you must discuss why the author wanted to narrow the perspective.
THIRD PERSON

More common is a story in third person, generally with one main character, the protagonist, who is the teller of the story. Occasionally, a story may have multiple protagonists, and, if so, it is done on purpose and must be discussed.
• How objective is the protagonist?
  Does the protagonist have a special bias or does he or she merely seem like God on high, reporting events?

• How does the protagonist express his or her opinions?
  Is the protagonist detached, unemotional, explosive, dramatic, comedic, and why?

• Can we trust the protagonist’s judgment?
  Do we believe what the protagonist says? What does the protagonist focus on and why?
Plot, quite simply, refers to the unfolding of events.

- What happens?
- What is told about the past?
- How are the details of plot given? Are they told directly or implied?
- Is the narration chronological or does it use flashbacks?
- What is the purpose for each scene?
• What is the motivation for the way the events unfold?
• Why are some events told and some events shown?
• What is the significance of the events?
• What conflicts are presented?
• Is there a reversal of the situation?
• Where is the climax of the story?
• What are the results of the events?
CHARACTER

- Is there a main character?
- Is the meaning of the story clear to the main character or only to the reader?
- What are the personalities of the characters?
- How does a character react to stress or conflict?
- Is the character revealed through dialogue or action?
- Is someone’s character explained directly or through implication?
• What does the physical description of the character reveal?
• What does a character’s name suggest?
• What is displayed through the interaction of characters?
• What is the significance of the exchange between major and minor character?
• What influences a particular character?
• What does a character learn about him/herself?
• Does a character change in the course of the story?
THEME

• What is the main theme of the work?
  What is the message the author leaves behind? Why was it written? What is important? What is to be learned?

• Is the theme developed more through setting, point of view, plot or character?
  Is there a predominant tool? How do the tools interact to create the message? Remember, while all factors may be acting in the story, your assignment may ask you to focus on one particular tool and analyze that one element.
BE THE CRITIC

• Make judgments about the work. Discuss effective and ineffective uses of the tools. Say what is good, what is bad. Say what is important and what is not in the message. Discuss the inventiveness of the work and its historical implications. You might also do some research about the life of the author and relate the author’s experiences to the story.
Make multiple copies of the table and keep them in the book while reading. If a quote seems important, mark it and fill out as many of the boxes as you can to analyze that particular quote. That way, the book will be intricately analyzed before you even start to write your paper.
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<th>Page # of Quote</th>
<th>Specific Meaning</th>
<th>Significance to Setting, Point of View, Plot or Character</th>
<th>Contribution to Definition and Development of Theme</th>
<th>Critique of Author’s Style, Tone, and Communication of Message</th>
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