

• Analyzing Fiction

Title: The title is such a small thing that it's often neglected, yet the perfect title can really affect how a piece works. A bad title can confuse the reader, ruin the suspense, or just discourage a reader from even starting to read. On the other hand, a great title can add depth and meaning to a work, hint at important themes, or just sound so intriguing it makes the reader want to start reading right away.

Plot: One way to think about plot is to imagine it as the skeleton of the story, the framework that arranges the other elements. Some pieces of fiction will be more "plot-heavy" that is, the plot is more central to the piece. Other works will hardly seem to have a plot at all.

Setting: Every story needs a place to happen, a where and a when. That's the setting. But setting can do more than provide a place for events to occur. It can be used to evoke atmosphere and mood. It can be an antagonist, preventing heroes from reaching their goals. Setting can give hints to characters' states of mind and attitudes, or it can be used symbolically, to hint at the story's theme. Setting can be so important to the story that it almost becomes another character.

Characters: Characters are sometimes considered the most important part of any kind of fiction. It is the characters and their interactions, after all, that drive the plot, that create the suspense and tension, and that readers rely on to draw them into the story. Well-drawn characters will seem to have lives outside of the fictional work (and writers often talk about characters as if they are real people).

Story: Closely related to plot, story is the bare bones of the narrative. It is the chronological sequence of events as they actually occurred in the narrative.

Discourse: The discourse of the narrative is all of the rhetorical strategies used to give the story its tone and purpose.

Point of view: The point of view of a story is the perspective from which the story is told—the character through which the reader experiences the fictional world (don't confuse it with narrative voice; see below). Most short works make use of a single point of view, while longer works may have many (but these are not rules). The main points of view are first person, second person (very rare), and third person, each with several variations.

First-person. This mode limits the narrative perspective to what the narrator knows, experiences, and finds out through interaction with other characters. This narrator may be an "outside" witness to the events, a minor character, or the central protagonist.

Second-person. In this mode, the reader is addressed as "you." Second-person is rarely used.

Third-person. The narrator is someone outside of the story who refers to all the characters by name, "he/she," or "they."

Omniscient. With this narrative convention, the narrator knows everything that needs to be known about the actions and characters, including their inner thoughts, feelings, and motives.

Limited. Here, the narrator tells the story in third person, but remains within the confines of what is perceived, thought, remembered, or felt by a single character. This character then becomes the focus or “center of consciousness” for the text.

Narrative voice: This is a difficult element to describe, and is thus often neglected or misunderstood. In short, the narrative voice is the voice in which a story unfolds. It may be a separate voice, or that of one of the characters.

Prose: Fiction is different from poetry because it is written in prose. We often think of prose as “normal” or “natural” writing, as opposed to the carefully constructed language of poetry. But prose is just as artificial as poetry. Fictionists choose words and language to have specific effects, just as poets do. Prose comes in several types, among them exposition, narrative, and dialogue. Each of these types of prose has a different function in fiction.

Scene: The real drama in fiction comes from scenes. This is not scene in the sense of setting, but scene as in a confrontation or interaction of some sort between characters (or one character and some object). Scenes are primarily constructed of dialogue, and each of the characters involved is striving to gain something (it can be something obvious, like escaping from the bad guy, or subtle, like staying awake during a boring lecture). Scenes function like building blocks over the framework of plot.

Form and Structure: Every piece of fiction needs a shape, and shape has two varieties: form and structure. Form is what the story looks like; for example, a story in the form of a letter, or a novel in the form of a diary. Some fiction combines several forms in one piece—a good example is the novel *Dracula*, which uses diaries, telegrams, letters and more. Structure, on the other hand, is the arrangement of the pieces, the order scenes appear in relation to one another.

Genre: The meaning of “genre” has changed over the years, but today we usually use it to refer to categories of fiction (or poetry or movies), usually separated by topic or writing style. Some examples are “science fiction,” “mystery,” and “romance.” The term “genre fiction” is sometimes used to distinguish supposedly second-rate works from those thought to have more literary value.