

Reading Fiction

Our English term **fiction** derives from the Latin *fictio*, “to make by shaping.” A work of fiction is a literary artifact “whose content is produced by the imagination and is not necessarily based on fact” (thefreedictionary.com). Fiction comes in three flavors—the **short story**, which ranges in length from a single paragraph to approximately 10,000 words; the **novella**, which often runs to about 30,00 words; and the **novel**, a book-length story, usually divided into chapters. For ease of analysis, a work of fiction may be broken down into its elements. Developing awareness of these elements, and how an author might use them to create a particular story, heightens our awareness of the art of fiction and increases our appreciation of the aesthetic power of narrative.

PLOT

The *artistic arrangement of events* that make up a story is called the plot. Most traditional stories follow a pattern of events, beginning with the establishment of a **conflict**, the struggle between opposing forces. The story progresses by means of a blend of *complications* and *exposition* that eventually reach a moment of **crisis**, or climax, in which the story’s central conflict is resolved. The French word for this **resolution** is *denouement*, or “unraveling.” In a novel, it is also common to have **subplots**, smaller side-stories that contribute to the overall effect of the main plot.

CHARACTER

The *literary depiction of a human personality* is called a character. The process of *characterization* is the technique by which an author creates this illusion. Typically, novels present the reader with **major** and **minor** characters, which may be seen as either *flat* or *round*, *static* or *dynamic*, according to the extent to which they resemble complex, multi-dimensional human beings. The central character in a story is called the *protagonist*, who comes into conflict with the story’s *antagonist*. Characters may be analyzed by examining and comparing their traits and motivations.

POINT OF VIEW

In fiction, *the perspective from which the story is told* is called point of view. A story may be told by an objective narrator or by a character in the story itself. The nearness of the narrator to the action results in psychic distance, affecting the emotional impact of the narrative. Typically, a story is narrated in either *first person* or *third person*, with varying degrees of *omniscience*. In many modern novels, the story is told from multiple perspectives, shifting points of view according to the author’s design. In such stories, comparing the voice and values of each point of view character is an important technique of literary interpretation.

SETTING

The **time, place, and cultural context** of a story create its setting. The determination of the story's setting contributes to the reader's appreciation of how history, geography, and sociology impact the narrative. In short, setting establishes the *fictional world* of the story and makes it vivid for the reader. Thus, setting contributes greatly to the illusion that the fiction is "real." Among other things, setting can be used to evoke a mood, prepare the reader for what is to come, or influence the development of the characters within the story, especially the protagonist.

THEME

The central idea or *meaning* of a story is called its theme. Since the point of a narrative is to tell a story rather than argue a thesis, a theme requires abstract thinking on the part of the reader, in which the cumulative effect of the narrative elements are seen to communicate a statement about human nature or the world at large. Due to their length and complexity, novels often present the reader with multiple themes. It's important to distinguish between plot, what *happens* in the story, and theme, what the story is *about*. A theme is not merely a topic or an "issue" that the story raises, but rather it is what the story says *about* the topic or issue.

SYMBOL

A *person, object, image, word, or event that evokes a range of additional meanings beyond its simple literal significance* is called a symbol. Like theme, interpreting symbols in narratives requires abstract thought on the part of the reader. A symbol invites and rewards meaning beyond the literal level by emphasizing its importance through repetition or emphasis and adding deeper layers of meaning and texture to the narrative. A symbol enriches the story without having to resort to painstaking explanations.

STYLE

A writer's style results from *a combination of literary choices*, including **diction**, **syntax**, and **tone of voice**. An author's choice and range of vocabulary (usually a result of the point of view), along with his/her sentence patterns, contributes greatly to the cumulative effect of the story. Another important contribution is tone, the writer or narrator's *attitude* towards the story's subject, self, and readers. This attitude determines a range of verbal choices that make up the writer's "voice." Most accomplished authors are recognized by their individual, or *signature*, style.