



Figure 1 The Writing Center and Academic Resource Center logo

Writing About Fiction

It is very likely that you will be asked to write an essay or paper about a piece of fiction at least once during your college career. In order to write a comprehensive, college-level paper, it is necessary to understand what fiction is (including its key elements), how to read effectively, and how to write coherently about someone else's work.

What is fiction?

"Fiction" refers to a broad range of literature that includes but is not limited to novels, short stories, poetry, and plays. In every work of fiction there are common elements: character, setting, plot, and theme. In order to write a thorough paper analyzing a story, it is important to understand these elements.

Character

A work of fiction would be incomplete without **characters**. Characters can be either *static* or *dynamic*. A static character does not change throughout the story; rather, they learn nothing from their experiences in the story and are generally not main characters. A dynamic character changes as a result of what happens in the story; they learn a lesson, grow as a person, or discover something about themselves as a result of the events in the story. Main characters are generally dynamic. When writing about characters, you should avoid merely summarizing what they say or do; rather, you should analyze *why* they say or do those things. Good writing features characters with as much depth as a real person, and often the reader must examine the subtleties and

peculiarities of the character to develop a deep understanding of the character and the story.

Setting

Setting refers to where and when the story takes place. The setting of a piece of fiction contributes greatly to the story. For example, a story that is set in urban New York in the 1990s is going to be very different from a piece set in the rural South in the 1960s. Setting shapes and influences character and plot. Do not, in your essay, simply describe the setting; discuss how it affects character and plot. While reading, think about how the story would be different if it took place at a different time or place. How would the characters and plot change if the setting were different?

Plot

The events that take place in a work of fiction are collectively called the **plot**. A plot consists of several parts: the exposition, rising action, climax, and falling action.

Exposition

The exposition of a plot is what takes place before the story itself. This information can be conveyed through flashbacks, dialogue, or a character's thoughts. Events in the exposition can directly affect a character's thoughts, feelings, motivations, and actions; it can also influence or directly cause what happens throughout the plot.

Rising Action

Rising action refers to any part of the plot that raises tension and leads up to the climax of the story. During this part of the plot, we generally get to know the characters and the setting. Also, this is the time when the conflict of the story becomes apparent. ("Conflict" is the motivating element in a story; it can be

human vs. human, human vs. God/nature/supernatural force, or human vs. internal force.)

Climax

The climax is the point where the conflict is resolved and the tension is released. At the climax, the reader usually sees a solution or end to the conflict of the story. Often it is difficult to decide what the true climax of the story is. When writing your essay, it is important to know what the climax is, why it happens, and how it affects the plot and characters.

Falling Action

Falling action refers to what happens between the climax and the end of the story. It ties up any loose ends and brings the story to a close. Usually during falling action, reflections on the rising action and climax are made.

Theme

Every good work of fiction includes one or more **themes**. A theme is a message or idea that the author incorporates throughout the work. It may be deep, difficult to understand, or moralistic. In a college-level paper, it is important to discuss themes; they may provide support for points you want to make in your essay. Theme affects and is affected by all the other elements (character, setting, and plot).

Reading Effectively

When reading a work of fiction, be sure to **annotate** as you read: underline key sentences/phrases (which you may quote in your essay), make notes in the margins, draw a timeline of the plot, and write down any information that you might find useful while writing an essay. Writing as you read also helps facilitate understanding, especially if the story is complicated or difficult to read. Reading notes are integral when beginning your essay.

Before you begin writing an essay, make sure you **understand the question** you are answering. Your professor may ask you to analyze, compare and contrast, evaluate, discuss, interpret, relate, or summarize. Each of these questions calls for a different type of answer. For example, to analyze means to break into separate parts and discuss, examine, or interpret each part; to evaluate means to give your opinion about the topic or cite the opinion of an expert. Read the question carefully and be sure to give an appropriate answer in your essay.

Writing About Fiction

Generating Ideas

The first step to writing a paper about a piece of fiction is generating ideas. (By this point, you should be familiar with the characters, setting, and plot.)

Reviewing your reading notes, look for key themes, patterns, or ideas present in the story. It is around these ideas which you will construct your paper. At this point you may want to do prewriting such as **freewriting, clustering, listing, or brainstorming** (see Writing Center handout “The Writing Process”).

Forming a Thesis

The next step is forming a **thesis statement**. A thesis is the main idea or argument that will be developed in your essay. It should consist of two parts: 1) the topic and 2) your opinion or analysis of the topic. It should not be too broad; you should be able to prove or support your thesis in three paragraphs of 6 to 12 sentences each. A thesis will generally be the last sentence of your introductory paragraph (see Writing Center handout “Thesis Statements”).

Organizing Ideas

Organization while writing is integral. Keep your reading notes, drafts, outlines, and prewriting close at hand when you begin your essay. When organizing your paper, it is important to include the following elements:

Defending the Main Idea/Thesis

In general, you will have three ideas to support your thesis. These ideas should in turn be supported by material from the piece of fiction about which you are writing: quotes, inferences about character or plot, analyses of symbolism, and so on.

Refuting Opposing Views

In a college-level paper, it is important to anticipate and address opposing arguments in your essay. In the case of an analysis, explain why you interpret the work of fiction the way you do; back up opinions with solid evidence from the piece.

Reaching a Conclusion

Although your thesis is the main point of your paper, you should also draw conclusions about the piece. You should discuss the implications or importance of your thesis or the themes in the work of fiction. How is the story relevant?

General Tips

1. Do your own thinking. Avoid summarizing or extensively quoting literary criticism of the story. Giving an original analysis using your own ideas is the point of essay writing.
2. Give your essay a straightforward, appropriate title that gives the reader an idea of what it is about. (For example, instead of titling an essay “To Kill a Mockingbird”, title it “Racism and Injustice in To Kill a Mockingbird”.)
3. Avoid lengthy quotations. It is acceptable to quote from the piece or to cite the opinions of critics, but your paper should be your own writing and thoughts. Essays are important for developing your critical thinking skills.
4. Do not generalize. Use specific language to express your ideas about the story. (For example, instead of saying “The story teaches moral lessons”,

you could say “The relationship between the young narrator and her father illustrates morals that were not pervasive in society at the time the book is set”.)

5. Remember that your analysis does not need to follow the plot in the order it happens. Support for the points in your essay can come from different parts of the story, and often it is more useful to cite certain scenes or lines than to give an explication of the plot as a whole.
6. Do not use your essay as a platform to give a moralistic lesson. An essay of this kind should examine a work of fiction from an objective, critical point of view. It is inappropriate to try to use your essay as a means of giving a moralistic or political lesson.

This handout is based on the following books:

Chaffee, John. Thinking Critically. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1997.

Hopper, Vincent; Cedric Gale; Ronald Foote; Benjamin Griffith. Essentials of English. New York: Barron's Educational Series, Inc., 1990.

For further reference, see the following books:

Reid, Stephen. The Prentice Hall Guide for College Writers. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1992.

Barnet, Sylvan. A Short Guide to Writing About Literature. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 1996.

All of the above texts are available in the Writing Center.

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