

Analyzing a Novel or Short Story



A literary analysis is **not** just a plot summary. Instead, it focuses on one or more **elements** of the story and makes a specific, arguable point (thesis) about these elements which can be supported with examples from the text and critics' opinions. The analysis can explore how different elements in a story relate to each other or how they connect to a larger political, social, economic, or religious context.

Examples of story elements for analysis:

What are the **themes** – the central or unifying ideas, or recurring topics, that are developed in the story?

What is the **point of view**– the perspective the author uses to tell the story? For **first person** (“I”), the **narrator** is one of the characters. For **third person** (“he, she, they”), the author tells the story from outside.

What is the **setting** - time and place? What is the **atmosphere or mood**?

What are the **characters** like, including their personalities and traits? Who is the **protagonist**? The **antagonist**? Do any characters change, and are the changes plausible or believable?

How would you describe the story's **style**, or use of language? Is the style informal or conversational? Is it formal? Is there any dialect?

What **emotions** does the story elicit? Is it scary, funny, inspirational, or satiric?

What are the **conflicts** in the story? Determine the **external conflicts** and the **internal conflicts**. Express the conflicts using the word **versus**, such as “the individual vs. society” or “dream vs. reality.”

What is the **climax** of the story? Is there any **resolution**?

What is the **genre** – what kind of literature? Is it comedy, mystery, tragedy, satire, romance?

Are there important **symbols** – elements that represent another concept? What might they mean?

What does the **title** of the story mean?

Does the story have more than one **level of meaning**?

How does the **plot** unfold? What is a summary of the events in time order, including relationships among those events?