

## **How to Read and Analyze Stories**

First, enjoy the story! Read or watch the entire story for enjoyment. Reflect on your response. Do you want to read or watch it again? Does it stay with you? Does it leave you with questions or thoughts to ponder? Does it remind you of anything in your life?

Then analyze:

**Synopsis:** A brief summary of 1 to 3 sentences of what happens in the story, how it turns out and what happens to the main characters involved. (This helps you develop an overview of the entire story as a whole.)

**Plot:** What happens? The sequence of events, stages of the action.

- Notice the story's beginning, middle and end
- **Beginning:** What's the situation before the story begins, then what initiates the conflict, or tension or disturbance that begins the story.
- **Middle:** What are the stages in the middle of the story as the main characters try to resolve the conflict, or solve the problem, or come to an understanding of their difficulties.
- **End:** The end often begins when the tension in the middle reaches a climax, or crisis, or turning point, producing a resolution, solution or new situation that needs no further change. Often, the story has a final end that focuses on the peace and relaxation of the new resolved situation to allow the reader to recover from the tension of the story.

**Shape of the plot:**

- Status quo in life reigns.
- Disturbance initiates conflict - struggle, problem
- Rising action - the main character, protagonist, makes efforts to resolve the conflict.
- Complication - the character's efforts fail and the deeper problem or conflict is revealed.
- Climax or crisis - the efforts to resolve the conflict peaks and a resolution appears.
- Resolution - The problem, or conflict, is resolved and a new way of living emerges.

**Conflict:** Plots often focus on conflict, or struggle.

- How would you describe the main conflict?  
How does the conflict arise?
- Is it an internal conflict within the character?
- Is it an external conflict caused by the surroundings or environment the main character finds himself/herself in?
- A conflict between two people? Conflict between society or social forces and one or more people? A conflict between nature and one or more people?
- An inner conflict within one or more people?
- How much of the action is external and how much internal to the characters themselves?

**Character arc, or change:** What happens to people?

- Who are the main characters?
- Who is the leading man or woman, and who are the supporting characters, perhaps the best friend?
- Which characters are dynamic, that is, they change during the story?
- Which characters are static, and don't change?
- For the dynamic characters, what stages do they go through in their search for resolution of the conflict and how do they change in each stage?
- By the end, how have their characters changed from the beginning?
- Often, the main character is the **protagonist**, and the forces, or person, that oppose the protagonist is called the **antagonist**.

**Characterization is how we know what kind of person the characters are:**

How do we know the type of person that the characters are?

- Through physical appearance?
- Through thoughts and words?
- Through feelings, emotional scenes?
- Through interaction with other characters?
- through dialogue?
- by the way they speak, their language or dialect?

**Motivation:** The relationship of characters to plot, action:

- Why do the characters do what they do?
- Do we understand the motivation of the characters in how they act?

**Setting:**

- Where does the story take place?
- How does the place influence the mood, action, overall course of the story?
- Would the story be different if it took place in another setting? w is the setting created?
- Consider geography, weather, time of day, social conditions, etc.
- What role does the setting play in the story? Important or only a backdrop?
- What is the historical period? Present, the past, or the future?
- How does the time period affect the language, atmosphere or social circumstances of the short story?

**Mood, voice or style:**

- What is the general feeling you get from *the way the story is presented*?
- What does the voice of the story-teller sound like?
- What is the language of the writing like? Dialect? Elegant? Sophisticated? Casual? Vulgar?

**Theme:** What is the underlying meaning of the story?

- The theme is the main idea, lesson, or message in the short story. It may be an abstract idea about the human condition, society, or life. Ask yourself:
- How is the theme expressed?

- Are any elements repeated and therefore suggest a theme?
- Is there more than one theme?  
What are the universal ideas that shine through in the film (in other words, what is it about, in general)?

## **The Emotions of the Visual World of Film**

Both theater and film are more visual than written literature. Theater does its story-telling largely through dramatizing the words of the script, with some visual element in its set design. Film adds a much greater visual dimension to story-telling through its images and soundtrack.

The emotional world of the story is communicated through the actors; style of acting, the camera shots and angles, the colors and lighting, the scenery and set design, the editing and pacing of the film.

### **The key question: How do the visual images tell the emotional story of the film?**

- What is the overall tone of the movie?
- Do you see the emotions evoked by the images change during the film?
- Do these changes support or detract from the acting and story itself?

### **Actors' style of acting**

- How fast or slowly do the actors speak their lines?
- Are their pauses between responses?
- What are the actors' personalities like beyond the acting? Do you like to watch the actor? Is he or she seem open, accessible, or closed and difficult to read? How alive does the actor seem to be? How authentically does the actor communicate his or her character?
- Does the actor seem to really feel the character's emotions, often called "method acting"? Or is the actor just speaking words and imitating emotions so the portrayal looks like deliberate acting, perhaps inauthentic to the character?

### **Role of stunt people, doubles, extras**

- Are the stunts, or "chase scenes," a natural evolution of the story?
- Or are they inserted to stir up adrenaline in viewers?
- Do you notice the stunt people, body doubles and extras? Are they credible?
- Are parts of the film obviously commercial "Hollywood" trying to attract certain viewers?
- Can you find examples where these add - or detract - from the story-telling and overall impact?

### **Camera shots:**

The camera shot is based on the camera's distance from the object:

- close-up – a very close shot where the camera lens focuses on some detail or the actor's face, intimate portraits of them experiencing their emotions?
- medium shot – a shot where the camera lens picks up some background or upper half of the actor.

- full shot – a shot where the camera lens has full view of the actor.
- long shot – shot taken at a distance from an object.

### **Camera angles is based on the camera position in the scene:**

- Is the camera facing the scene directly, giving it a neutral narrative quality?
- Is the camera looking down from above, or up from below?
- Are the angles a typical mix of normal angles or are they exaggerated and surprising?
- What is the emotional impact of angles on the overall story?
- Can you find examples where the angle itself gives an emotional impact to the scene?
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### **Soundtrack:**

- Does the movie use popular songs? Or a musical score?
- Are there scenes in silence, or street sounds?
- What is the emotional impact of the kind of music in relationship to the story?

### **Location, scenery, set design,**

- Does the film look like it is filmed "on location," in the actual place of the story?
- Does it appear produced on a set, even a large one? Does the set appear authentic to the style of the film, i.e. realistic in a realistic movie, dream-like in a surrealistic movie?
- Is the set spare and minimalist? Or is it vast and complicated?
- Where does the action take place, inside buildings, rooms or outside in natural settings?
- What is the weather like in the scenes?
- Does it always rain in sad scenes, or the sun shining in happy scenes?

### **Use of colors and lighting**

- What are the dominant colors in the scenes?
- Warm reds and yellows, cold blues and greens, mysterious shadows darkness?
- What is the background lighting? Realistic? Dream-like?
- What is the subliminal emotion that you feel as you watch it?

### **Editing:**

- How long are the scenes?
- What are the transitions between scenes like?
- Do they blend naturally from one to the next, so the pacing of the film feels organic, natural?
- Is the editing fast and choppy, speeding up the action?
- What does the speed of images and camera leave you feeling?
- A thriller might be filled with frantic action, so you feel charged with adrenaline.
- A romance or drama might be sad, or cheerful, or thoughtful.

Source: <https://courses.lumenlearning.com/introliterature/chapter/how-to-analyze-a-short-story/>