

HOW TO DISCUSS LITERATURE

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Starting a Discussion about a Work (The “It’s Neat” Theory of Literary Criticism): Ask yourself, “Are there any parts of the story that make me say ‘It’s neat when...?’” Often in a story, you will be able to pick out a central moment when something significant happens: a character changes her mind, two people finally open up to each other, or a shift happens in the direction of the plot. It could also be referred to as a “transformative moment.” Whether you like or dislike a work, there’s always a moment in which you develop an overall impression. You might just sit down and do some free writing. Start out by saying “It was great when...,” “I was blown away by...,” or “I was really ticked off when...” It is helpful sometimes to get your thoughts down on paper first. This activity might show you what you really want to say about your experience of the story.

The Turning Point (Collapsing the Reader’s Preconceptions): Often, the turning point in a story occurs when the reader’s preconceptions fall apart. The author invites the reader to build up a false impression of what is happening and then demolishes it with a true glimpse of reality. In the following short, short story, the author invites the reader to do just that, and then a turning point (or plot twist) changes everything. Authors often do this to show us how our conventional way of seeing the world is often, quite simply wrong.

A Break in the Case

“Eight stab wounds, eight corpses, zero clues,” sighed the inspector, driving through the night rain. “He’s neat and efficient.”

The criminologist polished his glasses. “Yes. Also slight, left-handed, myopic. Loves Beethoven. And I know his whereabouts.”

Screech of breaks.

“Where?” cried the inspector.

“Here,” said the other, grinning hugely as he slammed home the blade.

--William E. Bundell, found in *The World’s Shortest Stories*

What does your teacher want? What is literary criticism? Typical literature assignments involve analyzing, relating, and discussing, (1) *Analyzing* means breaking the story into separate pieces. These pieces might consist of major events in the plot, but more often they consist of things other than that. For example, you could analyze a story into various perspectives held by the characters. Or you could analyze it into the literary devices used by the author, major and minor themes, social issues encountered, use of rhythm or timing, recurring images or symbols, noticeable cultural influences, conflicts, etc. The choices are endless. Next comes (2) *relating the pieces to each other*. How do the pieces work together to support your overall impression.

For example, how do the different characters' perspectives in a story give the reader greater insight into life's conflicts? Once you have compared your pieces to each other and made them relevant to your overall impression, (3) *discussing* the work becomes possible. This means that you state your impression and back it up with parts of the story or poem. You can draw almost any general conclusion from a story or poem, but when you discuss a work you must be able to back up your conclusions with examples. In other words, the parts of the work that you refer to must illustrate your point.

Literary criticism does *not* mean "critiquing" the author (e.g. "I think Chaucer did a good job."). Avoid judging a work in terms of good and bad. Literature usually portrays a world that is much more open to interpretation than "right and wrong." If a work strikes you as "really good," try talking about *how* it is good. Be specific. Example: Instead of saying "It is really great when..." try something more like this: "It's likely that even the most skeptical reader's position on this issue will change if he or she follows the main character through her ordeal."

Elements of Literature that People often Discuss

- 1. Theme:** The theme is like a huge idea that shows itself in a work's events or images. For example, the dominant theme of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* could be seen as revenge. To the author, revenge is no small thing but a cosmic principle, a powerful fact of life, that can overtake us and rule our lives for a while. Literature is all about this big overarching picture. The images and events of a work of literature help us explore a theme that is otherwise too vast and too deep for us to fully grasp. But even though a theme is too big, we can still experience it and recognize it as we encounter it in the details. Think of each smaller event of a story, for example, as a star in a larger constellation. When you connect the dots, what picture emerges? What overall impression?
- 2. Characterization:** The characters of a story are often the most interesting elements. Any given character has two kinds of features behind his or her personality: intrinsic features and developmental features. The *intrinsic features* are the elements of a character that do not change. Examples of these are courage, conviction, humility, or malice. They may be mysterious and reveal themselves only slowly, but they never disappear from behind the character's actions. The *developmental features* of a character are the parts that have to do with the past, present, and future. Psychological baggage is an example of this. Very often the protagonist of a story changes gradually by freeing himself from psychological baggage—that is, from his past. As the story progresses, it becomes obvious that his inner intrinsic features are getting stronger while the developmental ones gradually lose their power over him.

Types of Characters:

- **Dynamic:** undergoing an important change due to action within plot
- **Static:** going through little or no change, usually playing a supporting role to the main character
- **Stock:** stereotypical, relying heavily on cultural types; narrowly defined. These characters are fairly predictable.
- **Flat:** having almost no depth or complexity; usually static as well. They appear more predictable than spontaneous.
- **Round:** having depth and complexity. Round characters are usually dynamic and have compellingly human personalities. They are usually, at some point at least, spontaneous and unpredictable.

3. **Character Development:** How do the characters change? Think about the development of the characters. You may want to make a list of names if the characters become too numerous to remember. The change usually involves a change of perspective. For example, a character may start out as a stereotypical business man, one who views life as a game and people as objects to be manipulated. By the end of the story, he may begin to see that there's another, less mechanical way of looking at it.
4. **Catharsis:** In literature, catharsis is an emotional transformation experienced by a character—or by a reader who identifies with a character. It is a release of emotion that somehow leaves a person changed, resulting in a fresher perspective or outlook. Often catharsis refers to suffering as a necessary step toward a new beginning. But sometimes catharsis comes about through laughter or joy. A good example of catharsis occurs in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Many of the characters lie murdered at the end, and yet many readers are left with a sense of peace and clarity, as though their own feelings of revenge have been purified by the tragedy.
5. **Setting:** How does a story's setting provide for the exploration of the theme? For example, in a science fiction novel, how does a world dominated by computers and machines provide a setting in which human compassion can be explored? Also, note how the values of a culture—or the conditions of the landscape—at a particular place and time make special demands on the characters, forcing them to wrestle with the overall theme. And finally, note that there can be several layers of setting. For example, in the classic novel *Interview with the Vampire*, the story begins with a vampire stalking a reporter in the present-day streets of San Francisco. The bulk of the novel, however, takes place within the story that the Vampire tells that reporter—which means that there are (at least) two layers of setting. This idea of layers is very much like the idea of “a dream within a dream.”

6. **Plot:** Sequence of events that take place in the story. Common parts of a story's plot occur as follows:
- Exposition:** provides reader with background and informs him or her about plot, theme, setting, and characters of a story. It presents important "ingredients" of the story before the action begins to rise.
 - Rising Action:** central part of a story, in which various problems arise, leading up to the climax.
 - Conflict:** the primary "problem" in a story, usually a struggle between opposing forces and ultimately some major action or reaction by the person(s) involved.
 - Climax:** the point of the greatest amount of tension in a literary work. Also the turning point in the action. Often this is the point where the reader's preconceptions fall apart to be replaced a healthy dose of reality.
 - Falling Action:** this is where a change is seen in the characters affected by the solving of the main conflict
 - Denouement:** the end result or final resolution.
7. **Narrative Point of View:** Determines through whose perspective the story is told.
- 1st Person Narrative:** The author or narrator refers to himself with the personal pronoun (*I, me, my, myself*). This mode of narration may also use second and third-person pronouns in addition to first.
- 2nd Person:** The author or narrator addresses the reader directly as *you* and may use the words *we* and *us* as well. The author may still use third-person pronouns, in addition, but not first person.
- 3rd Person:** The author refrains from using first or second person and only refers to characters as *he* or *she* or *it*.
8. **Simile:** A reference to something as being comparable to something else. The author usually uses the word *like* or *as*. "Sarah was like a passive vampire, fishing for compliments from her teacher and basking even in the smallest amount of praise."
9. **Metaphor:** A reference to something as actually being something else. "Sarah, the emotional vampire, constantly fished for compliments from her teacher. She would bask even in the smallest amount of praise."
10. **Personification:** Giving living characteristics and personality to non-living objects. "The cello moaned forth its lament from the orchestra pit."
11. **Anthropomorphism:** A specific form of personification that applies *human* characteristics to animals or objects. "The ibis mentally critiqued each bug before devouring it."

12. Irony: An opposition between two different ideas, events, or perspectives.

Verbal Irony: Spoken irony. Saying one thing and meaning the opposite. Sarcasm is a good example: “‘This is just great!’ said the bride when menacing clouds finally unleashed their downpour upon her guests.” The bride is being verbally ironic.

Situational Irony: When an event is different than what might be expected.

Dramatic Irony: A circumstance in which a character is ignorant about the true nature of her predicament and the reader knows the truth. Dramatic irony is most effective when characters make fateful choices based on incorrect information, information that only the reader realizes is incorrect.

13. Symbolism: Any object, person, place, or action that has both a meaning in itself, while at the same time representing for something else, such as an idea, belief, or value. A shattering wine glass, for example, can symbolize death.

14. Archetype: An archetype is similar to a theme. However, an archetype has an otherworldly, god-like quality. Archetypes are invisible presences in a story that only reveal themselves through symbols or through symbolic events. They are evident only through their manifestations in images in a poem or through events in story that show us that they are exerting an influence. For example, story that contains events that involve penetration—ruthless exploration of uncharted territory, violent death by impalement, and rape—may indicate that a dangerous masculine archetype is present. A poem that talks about hunger, a dark cave, and the devouring of heroes may indicate a disturbing feminine archetype. A story that contains surrender, doves, and a sunrise might indicate an archetype of peace and hope.

15. The author’s influences: The way the author’s own background, history, personality, and status affect their literary works. Though it is important to respect a work based on its own merits, the author’s life sometimes gives us an insight into the issues he or she is attempting to shed light on. Sometimes you can list a number of experiences in the author’s life that appear to have affected his or her work.

Rules for Writing about Literature:

1. Write in the Present Tense: When writing about the events or images in a work of literature, write in the present tense. The events of a fictional story have been immortalized; they never happened in real life, but they sit on the library shelf, happening right now as words on the page. In contrast, if you write about non-fictional events in history, you use the *past* tense because those events did actually happen in the past.

2. **Write in the Third Person:** Most professors expect the third-person point of view because it tends to be the most objective. The third-person perspective requires that you avoid mentioning yourself as *I* or addressing the reader as *you*. Third person uses pronouns like *he*, *she*, *it*, and *they*.
3. **Avoid using contractions.** This is formal writing, so the word *it's* should be written as *it is*.
4. **Referring to Titles of Works:** When you include the title of a story or poem in your writing, put quotation marks around it. When you refer to a larger work like a book, an epic poem, or a collection of poems, use italics. The same goes for music: the name of a song should be placed in quotation marks and the name of an album in italics. Example:

In *Edgar Allen Poe: The Collected Works*, the most recognized of piece, by far, is "The Raven."

Also, notice how words in the above titles are capitalized. The rules for this are as follows:

- The first and last words of a title are always capitalized
- Do not capitalize articles (*a*, *an*, and *the*) or prepositions (*about*, *for*, *by*...)

Examples: "A Rose for Emily" (a short story)

One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest (a novel)

"Over the Hills and Far Away" (a song)

5. **Quoting the Author:** Quoting the author's exact words can add very powerful support to your point. Do *not* quote the author unless doing so directly illustrates your point. Quoted material should never be used to fluff your paper with thoughts that aren't your own. Do not simply drop quotes in the middle of your paragraph. A quote must be connected to your writing so that it powerfully demonstrates your point. As a general guideline, try not to include more than one small quote per page, or one large one per 3 pages.

6. **Citing Your Sources:** Here are a couple examples of proper citation, one where the writer and author are the same and another where they are not.

A. From the body of the paper:

When many members of the Native American community converted to Christianity, it caused a form of culture shock among the community's elders.

"He has put a knife on the things that held us together, and we have fallen apart" (Achebe 176).

From the "Works Cited" Page

Achebe, Chinua. *Things Fall Apart*. New York Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group Inc. 1959.

B. From the body of the paper:

When a neighbor suggests that the lottery should be abandoned, Old Man Warner responds, "There's *always* been a lottery" (24).

From the "Works Cited" page:

Jackson, Shirley. "The Lottery." *The Lottery*. New York: Popular Library, 1949.

C. Citing a work that appears in an Anthology:

Oates, Joyce Carol. "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" *Literature and the Writing Process*. Ed. Elizabeth McMahan, Susan X Day, and Robert Funk. 8th ed. New Jersey: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2007. 188-201.

For additional instructions on citation visit [http:// owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/747/01/](http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/747/01/)

7. **Avoid Passive Voice:** Though passive voice should not be used in most papers, it is not always a bad idea use it.

Examples of Passive Voice and Active Voice:

Passive: "The girls were followed by the boy."

Active: "The boy followed the girls."

Passive: "More than 100 barrels were dumped in the river."

Active: "The protestors dumped more than 100 barrels in the river."

There are two instances where use of passive voice is actually encouraged.

*Formal and scientific papers that discourage the use of personal pronouns like I and we.

*When the subject of a sentence is unknown or takes away from the credibility of a statement.