

01. Key Features of Prose Fiction: Plot

Please note the differences between the types of prose fiction, which are all governed by length:

Novels: Multi-chapter narratives without any specific length requirements or restrictions.

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Short Stories: Very short narratives, typically not longer than one or two chapters.

Flash Fiction: Extremely short works of fiction that average around 100 words.

N.B.! As per your course requirements for this module, you will not be expected to analyse anything more than an extract from a novel, novella or short story.

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N.N.N.B.!!! Plot is only **peripherally useful**, at best, as it is **too broad** a topic to be used to substantiate an argument being made in a **short analysis**, such as the ones you will be asked to do. **Retelling the story** or **summarising the plot** in anything more than two or three sentences is **counter-productive**, as the only key question answered by the plot is **“what”**, as in **“what is the passage about?”** The best thing that answering this question can do for you is to **give you clues** about **likely themes** from the passage, so you would be **wasting your time** trying to provide a **detailed retelling of the plot**.

Plot:

Definition: A plot is the series of events portrayed in a story, the way these events are structured and how they connect to one another to become the story.

Plots can be divided into **main plots** and **sub-plots**:

- **Main plot:** The primary or most obvious action that can be seen to be directly connected and that extends through the whole narrative.
- **Sub-plot:** Sub-plots tend to be slightly harder to identify, as they usually support the main plot, while being distinct from it.

The number of plots and sub-plots is generally linked to character development and overall development of the story in its entirety.

A plot can be **linear** and **chronological** (the action happening within a specific order), or **non-linear** (the plot can be **fragmented** and **disordered**, meaning that sequences of events do not happen within the narrative as they would in real time).

The more complex a work of fiction is, the more detail will be incorporated into the sub-plots and there will be a larger number of sub-plots incorporated into the work.

Naturally, this means that there are typically few, if any, sub-plots in short stories and none at all in flash fiction!

There are various types of plot development, although basic plot development is often structured like so:

Exposition: The beginning of the story which will normally introduce the main character (or protagonist – more on that later!), the setting of the story (the location and time period), other important characters and the protagonist's goals.

Rising action: This is the build-up of events within a plot, where conflict develops between characters and the characters are 'fleshed out'. Moral and physical challenges are presented to the main character who will attempt to negotiate around the difficulties faced.

The Climax: Is the point in the plot where the main character directly confronts the source of the conflict in the narrative. The main character will frequently be forced to make a choice at this point that will reveal his or her moral quality. This is the "high point" of the narrative.

Falling action: In the wake of the revelation of the central conflict of the narrative, the main character is often at his or her lowest point and furthest from victory. As the events of the story gradually lead the main character to triumph or defeat, the narrative "winds down" towards **resolution**, which is the end of the story, where all the conflicts have been settled, for good or ill.

02. Key Features of Prose Fiction: Character

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N.N.N.B.!!! **Characters** are the vehicles that **move plots forward**, so they can be **critical** to the **pacing** of the story. More significantly than that, they are also normally used to **highlight the themes** in a narrative, as so many themes revolve around the human condition. **Character** is a very **important** and **useful** feature of **prose fiction**, as sound character analysis can often be used to **discover central themes** and **support** an **analysis** of said themes. Of the four key features of prose fiction, **character is the second most important** – just be careful not to turn a character analysis into a retelling of the story. Focus on **what events tell us** about the **characters**, rather than how the **characters influence the events**.

Character:

Most narratives normally include many characters, but at least one will stand out as the focus of events. This is the **main character** or **protagonist**. The protagonist is frequently opposed by another character or institution, which we call the **antagonist**.

Very complex works of fiction often avoid having a single protagonist or antagonist. These novels are normally very long and are considered **epic** or **grand narratives**.

Shorter narratives, such as short stories, often only include one or two characters, as their length restricts the amount of **exposition** they can engage in.

Often the **rising action** and **climax** are driven by the conflicts between the **protagonist** and **antagonist** of the narrative.

N.B.! Sometimes the protagonist can act in very negative ways and actually be the **villain** of the narrative. Sometimes the protagonist can also have very selfish motivations, but still accomplish positive goals, in which case we call him or her an **anti-hero**.

Characterisation is developed through plot, sub-plots, within the descriptions, the thoughts, the dialogue (the monologues, soliloquies and internal monologues), the actions and reactions of the various characters. This development of character is often subtle and must be indirectly inferred by the reader through observation and analysis of the above.

Apart from driving the action of the narrative, characters are also important as they often act as a lens or filter through which the reader experiences the narrative, which brings us to the different **perspectives** or **modes** from which an author can write prose fiction:

- **First Person**
 - The reader's perspective is from within the mind of the protagonist.
 - The entire narrative is subjective and coloured by the perceptions of the protagonist.
 - **I, Me, Mine** and **My** – the use of personal pronouns within the text suggests that the perspective is **biased** towards the protagonist.
 - The audience then **only** knows what the narrator knows. Knowledge and perspective is limited to the protagonist.
 - The narrator's **limitations** and biases must be taken into account when reading such a text, and **questions** must be asked about how the narrator's impressions of a sequence of events or a conversation have been distorted to present a singular perspective.
- **Second Person**
 - The reader's perspective is **secondary**. This means that the narrator, most likely the author, often talks directly to the audience, asking them to engage in the reading of the text, often from a more personal and intimate space.
 - **You** and **Your** are indicators of an author using second-person narrative.
 - This rare form of writing in prose fiction is very difficult to get right, but is very common in text books, study guides, technical manuals, speeches and presentations (i.e. non-fiction).
- **Third Person**
 - The narrator is on the **outside** looking in, without being directly involved in the action.

- o This sort of narrative is generally considered to provide a fairly **objective** perspective, as the **author's voice** provides the narrative and tends to be **neutral**.
- o **He, She, Their** and **It** are indicators of an author using second-person narrative.
- o There are generally two types of third-person perspective:
 - **Third-Person Omniscient** - All is known to the reader and all characters' thoughts and feelings are exposed.
 - **Third-Person Limited** - When the reader is limited to the perspectives of a particular individual or individuals within sections of the text or sometimes throughout the entire work.

03. Key Features of Prose Fiction: Setting

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N.N.N.B.!!! **Setting** should be **discussed briefly** in your analysis, at best, as it largely provides **clues to theme**. However, you do need to be careful here, **as recurring elements** in the setting are often a “**motif**”, which is a technique that can be used to **reinforce a theme**. In short, while **setting is not crucial**, it is often **more important than plot**.

Setting:

Definition: The time and place (location and/or society) where the story occurs.

Often the context of a story is important in an analysis. The setting of a story helps to provide us with context.

Time:

When a story is set can obviously be very important, as societies tended to be very different historically to how they are today, in terms of both technology and outlook.

Sometimes texts are fragmented and jump between time periods which can span moments or centuries.

Time can be used to alter the way the reader perceives a story and can affect themes and plot development significantly. For example, **flashbacks** can be used to create exposition at any point in a narrative, by taking the reader back to the protagonist’s past, in order to highlight important moments of character development.

Location:

Within longer texts (Novels and Novellas) multiple locations can, and often are, used to help create a sense of “movement” in the narrative. Obviously, these locations are all relevant to the plot and the characters, but they can also be used to tell the reader something about the themes of a story.

Within shorter texts (Short Stories and Flash Fiction) often there is only a single setting used in the narrative. As the action normally occurs in a short space of time in the story, a single location is normally a sufficient backdrop for the action and it pays for these stories to be as contextually simple as possible, given their rather limited length.

How the author uses the setting will influence the understanding of a text quite a lot:

For example, a narrative which is set on a space station in the year 3004 would immediately be placed within the genre of science fiction, while a novel set within a world with unicorns and winged individuals would be considered fantasy.

Placing a text within a particular sub-genre (like science fiction or fantasy) will create certain expectations of how the text will develop.

04. Key Features of Prose Fiction: Theme

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N.N.N.B.!!! **Theme** is the **most important feature** of prose fiction, as it is the **primary reason** why we conduct **critical analysis**. By **understanding** the **themes** of a text, we understand what the **purpose or message of the text** is. Much of your **critical analysis** will **focus** on **identifying** the **themes** in a passage and then **explaining** to your **reader** how the **author uses language** to **create** these **themes**. This is how you explain what the passage **means to you** with proof. **Without substantiation**, you are merely **expressing an opinion**, but with **sufficient substantiation**, you are **unveiling a truth!**

Theme:

Definition: The central topics or ideas that can be found in a story.

These topics and ideas are often woven throughout the plot. These **themes** can be based on almost anything, although often theme is linked to human existence and identity.

- Emotions (such as love and hate)
- Social (gender and relationships)
- Economic issues (ownership and production)
- Political (conflict and globalism)
- Environmental (eco-politics and veganism)
- Physical (Body issues)

- Metaphysical (questions of existence)

Such examples as the ones above provide a broad base on which you may consider the notion of theme. If you consider the topics above, you may see that they overlap. Themes can merge and blend together, providing support and opposition within a text and ultimately adding a level of complexity to the text, which will often influence what the reader understands the text to be about.

Longer, more complex texts tend to have the space to include many complex themes and ideas, while shorter texts, such as short stories and flash fiction will generally only contain one or two themes, at the most.

Everyone can interpret a text differently in literature, which brings us neatly to the importance of theme, in terms of **critical analysis**. The themes of a text are what **lie at the heart of a text** – they are the ideas we get from a text when we interpret it. **Thus, they are the goal of critical analysis.**

However, because each reader can interpret a text their own way (**subjectively**), it becomes necessary, within literary studies, to **substantiate or support** any interpretation of the text through a **close reading** of the text as well as, if needed, secondary readings. If you do not argue for your interpretation through close readings, then the actual analysis becomes problematic, as there is insufficient evidence to support your arguments.

05. Key Features of Prose Fiction: How to use all these Summaries

Your Study Guide gives **equal weight** to all four key features of **prose fiction** (plot, character, setting and theme), but this is **terribly misleading** as it applies to your course and the types of questions you will be asked in the examination and in your assignments.

Firstly, always remember that you will **never** be examined on an entire piece of prose fiction, unless it's **flash fiction**, so there is **no benefit** in discussing elements of plot, character, setting or theme that **do not appear** in the **exact**

passage reproduced in your question – make **absolutely sure** that you **only discuss** the passage referred to in your question!

Secondly, not **all** of these features are **equally useful** in an analysis:

- **Plot** is only **peripherally useful**, at best, as it is **too broad** a topic to be used to substantiate an argument being made in a **short analysis**, such as the ones you will be asked to do. **Retelling the story** or **summarising the plot** in anything more than two or three sentences is **counter-productive**, as the only key question answered by the plot is **“what”**, as in **“what is the passage about?”** The best thing that answering this question can do for you is to **give you clues** about **likely themes** from the passage, so you would be **wasting your time** trying to provide a **detailed retelling of the plot**.
- **Characters** are the vehicles that **move plots forward**, so they can be **critical** to the **pacing** of the story. More significantly than that, they are also normally used to **highlight the themes** in a narrative, as so many themes revolve around the human condition. **Character** is a very **important** and **useful** feature of **prose fiction**, as sound character analysis can often be used to **discover central themes** and **support** an **analysis** of said themes. Of the four key features of prose fiction, **character is the second most important**– just be careful not to turn a character analysis into a retelling of the story. Focus on **what events tell us** about the **characters**, rather than how the **characters influence the events**.
- **Setting** should also be **discussed briefly**, at best, as it largely provides **clues to theme**. However, you do need to be careful here, as **recurring elements** in the setting are often a **“motif”**, which is a technique that can be used to **reinforce a theme**. In short, while **setting is not crucial**, it is often **more important** than **plot**.
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