



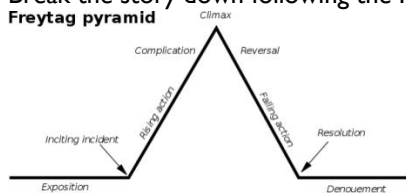
Analyzing Fiction: The Elements of Fiction

By analyzing a short story or novel, you gain a better understanding of the story. By examining the story through each separate element, you can begin to appreciate factors you might have noticed about the story and see how they work together. Writers use these elements of literature to make meaning, so nothing in a story is left to chance—**assume everything is there for a reason**. Ask why? How does this element (plot, setting, imagery) contribute to the overall meaning (theme) of the story?

1. Plot. It refers to the main events that take place throughout the story.

Questions to consider:

- What are the series of events in the story?
- What types of conflict occur throughout the story? What is the main conflict that starts the story's action?
- Break the story down following the Freytag Pyramid



1. Exposition: setting the scene. The writer introduces the characters and setting, providing description and background.

2. Inciting Incident or Complication: something happens to begin the action. A single event usually signals the beginning of the main conflict. The inciting incident is sometimes called 'the complication'.

3. Rising Action: the story builds and gets more exciting.

4. Crisis: where the conflict reaches its greatest tension, point at which the uncertainty or tension is the greatest, where a decision or action is taken, turning point. Usually the climax follows closely.

6. Climax: the consequence of the crisis, it is the story's high point and make take the shape of an action, decision, illumination or realization.

7. Falling Action/Resolution/Dénouement: (a French term, pronounced: *day-noo-moh*) the ending. The resolution or denouement is the completing of the story after the climax. At this point, any remaining secrets, questions or mysteries which remain after the resolution are solved by the characters or explained by the author? Does the writer use flashback? Flashforward? If so, how?

2. Setting. It refers to the time, place, and social and historical context.

Questions to consider:

- What is the setting in the story?
- How does the setting contribute to the story? In particular, how might setting relate to character?
- How does the setting impact the plot in the story? How does setting relate to plot?
- How does the setting operate figuratively or metaphorically or symbolically to create meaning and mood in the story?

3. Characters. All stories include a protagonist. Many stories include an antagonist or villain. Many stories also include secondary or minor characters.

Questions to consider:

- What are the character's traits—describe these in terms of adjectives
- Who is the protagonist in the story? Why?
- Who is the villain (antagonist) in the story? Why?
- How do we learn about the character? What do we learn? (from actions, from the narrator/narration, from what others say about the character)
- What conflicts does the character experience?-internal? External? How does the character deal with these conflicts?
- How does the character change as the story progresses? Which characters are "round" and "flat?"

4. Theme. It refers to the main idea of the story. It is the truth the writer reveals. Often, the writer doesn't explicitly reveal the theme.

Questions to consider:

- Fool-proof method for determining theme:
--What is the story about? (What is its subject? What idea does it communicate?)
--What does the story seem to say about this subject? this idea? What truth does it communicate about this subject? idea?
When this subject or idea seems particularly central and important within a story, it is likely to be the main theme for the story.
- What was the writer's purpose in writing the story?

5. Point of View. It refers to the person who is telling the story or perspective from which the story is told. Remember that the author and narrator are not the same. The narrator is the person who is telling the story.

Questions to consider:

- What point of view does the writer use? 1st? 2nd? 3rd? (1st reliable/unreliable?; 3rd dramatic, omniscient, limited?)
- How does the point of view impact the story?
- Does the author use point of view to reveal or conceal?
- How does the narrator impact the story? For instance, the first-person narrator only knows what he sees or hears. But the third-person-omniscient narrator is all knowing.
- Is there any dramatic irony in the point of view (i.e. gap between what the narrator knows and what the reader knows)? What is the effect or purpose of this irony?
- Why did the author choose the particular point of view?

6. Style and Tone. Style refers to the writer's choice of language and the sentence types and structures. The tone refers to writer's attitude toward the subject and readers.

Questions to consider:

- What types of diction does the writer use? Slang? Formal? Profanity? High? Middle? Low? How does it impact the story? How does it impact you as the reader?
- How does particular use of diction (specific-general, concrete-abstract, denotation-connotation) affect meaning?
- What attitudes and emotions are expressed? How does the language used communicate these attitudes?
- How does any irony, satire, or humor in the tone of the story contribute to its meaning?

7. Figurative Language. The writer uses language to mean something other than its literal meaning, in order to produce a special effect or new meaning. Popular types of figurative language are simile, metaphor, and personification.

Questions to consider:

- Does the writer use simile? Why is it used?
- Does the writer use metaphor? Why is it used?
- Does the writer use personification? Why is it used?

8. Imagery. It refers to the sensory images that the writer uses to develop the story. Sensory images are word pictures that appeal to one or more of the senses, such as sight, taste, smell, touch, and hearing.

Questions to consider:

- What types of imagery does the writer use? How does it make the story believable?
- Identify some passages where the writer uses imagery? What types of imagery does the writer use? Why does the writer use it?
- How does the imagery affect the mood of the story?

9. Symbolism. The author uses a symbol to mean something other than its literal meaning. For instance, an owl can represent wisdom. As signs for something else, what makes symbols more than just signs is that they operate on multiple levels and have multiple possible meanings (at the same time). Think of the difference of a stop sign as a sign vs. the cross as a symbol.

Questions to consider:

- What sorts of symbols are used by the writer?
- Do elements of character or setting appear symbolic? Why?
- Is the symbol contextual or universal? How?