



# Analyzing & Writing About Short Fiction

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## How do we write about short stories?

Writing about stories means *analyzing* them first.

We look critically at works of fiction and articulate how the *parts* contribute to a *thematic interpretation*.



Remember that a literary essay is more than just a summary or a review.

Instead, it is an articulation of your unique *interpretation* (*your argument about the meaning/theme*) based on support from the *specific elements* of a work.

As such, essays about literature should discuss important elements such as:

-theme

-plot

-characterization (*and point of view*)

-the setting (*physical location, era, time of day, etc.*)

-symbolism

-and the author's style



## Theme:

the unifying concept or idea of a literary work -- a reader's interpretation of what the author intended the story to mean.

Analyzing literary elements such as *plot*, *characters*, *point of view*, *setting*, *narrative style*, and *symbolism* can all contribute to effective interpretations of *theme*.

## Setting:

the physical and social context in which the action of a story occurs: time, place, social environment, etc. Setting can/should be used to evoke theme & mood.

-time of day

-place (*home, office, back seat of a car, etc.*)

-geography (*country? state? city?*)

-era (*modern day, recent past, distant past, etc.*)



## **Dialogue:**

verbal exchanges between characters—it makes characters more real and three-dimensional by revealing their thoughts, responses, and emotional states.

## **Narrator:**

the teller of the story. The narrator affects our understanding of the story by filtering what is told through his or her own perspective (or lack thereof).

## Point of View:

A story's point of view refers to the source of the narrative voice. It is the perspective the author uses to tell the story.

1<sup>st</sup> person P.O.V. - "I went to the store and saw Bill with Emma."

2<sup>nd</sup> person P.O.V. - "You went to the store and saw Bill with Emma."

3<sup>rd</sup> person P.O.V. - "He/she went to the store and saw Bill with Emma."



## 3<sup>rd</sup> Person P.O.V. Variations:

### 3<sup>rd</sup> person objective:

The narrator cannot see into any of the character's minds—he/she narrates without any insights into how or why other characters feel or think.

### 3<sup>rd</sup> person limited:

The narrator can see into only one or two of the characters' minds.

### 3<sup>rd</sup> person omniscient:

An all-knowing narrator, also called “the voice of God,” who can see into all of the characters' minds.

## **Symbolism:**

pervasive and large metaphors that often relate to or reveal the theme in a work.

## **Conventional Symbols:**

symbols that are widely understood by and accepted by most people.

*water = fertility*

*rain = melancholy*

*serpents = evil*

*storms = destruction*



## Style:

Each author's style is as unique as fingerprint, and, as such, breaking down, identifying, and articulating the *elements* that lend to this unique style are important parts of interpreting stories.

Consider the differences between Junot Diaz and his narrative style in *The Brief Wonderful Life of Oscar Wao* and the narrative style of Kent Haruf in *Plainsong*.

Look for:

- Diction
- Sentence constructions
- Characterization
- Dialogue
- Abstract or concrete language?

## Pitfalls:

Avoid too much re-telling of the story. A brief summary of some elements of the plot is necessary, but do not mistake this for telling the story over again in the essay.

Your task is interpretation, not summary. It is to deconstruct the elements of the work, not just tell the story over again.



**Part Two:**

## “Hills Like White Elephants” by Ernest Hemingway

1. How is the tone set? How does the setting contribute to the theme?
2. How does the fact that this is predominantly dialogue affect the story?  
How does it impact the plot? The characterization?
3. Explain the relevance: “Isn’t that all we do? Look at things and try new drinks?”
4. Explain: “It’s really not anything. It’s just to let the air in.”
5. What is the theme at work in this story? How do the parts contribute to your interpretation?

- Review questions
- Discuss in groups
- Class discussion
- In-class journal entry #2



## “Reunion” by John Cheever

1. What is the relevance of Charlie describing his father as “my future and my doom...”?
2. How does Charlie truly feel about his father? How can you prove this from the text?
3. How is Charlie’s parent’s divorce described? Does it reveal anything about Charlie’s father’s character? About Charlie’s relationship with him?
4. What does it mean that Charlie’s father assumes these different almost preposterous personas at each restaurant?
5. Why does the story start and end with “The last time I saw my father...?” Does “the last time” mean it was just the most recent, or that he has no plans to see his father again? How can you tell?

- Review questions
- Discuss in groups
- Class discussion
- In-class journal entry #3

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