

Writing and Study Skills Services – Laurier Brantford
Reading Literature

Your goal when reading literature is usually to interpret the meaning of a text. In order to interpret meaning, you must be able to identify elements within the narrative and understand the significance of those elements. Focus on understanding why the author has made certain decisions and how those decisions have affected the work as a whole.

The process of interpreting meaning involves reading a number of times:

1. Read once for an initial understanding.
2. Read a second time and make note of narrative elements, questions you have, and connections you make between parts of the text, to other texts and to the real world.
3. Read a third time. Read the text with the notes you've made, look for anything you may have missed, and add more detail.

Some narrative elements to look for:

- **Theme** – What is the overall idea that the author is advancing? What is the significance of this idea? How has the author developed this theme?
- **Plot** – What series of events is taking place? Why are they taking place in a particular order?
- **Setting** – What is the time and place of the plot? What is the significance of this setting?
- **Characters** – Who are the people in the story? What unique qualities, behaviours, needs, and values do each of them possess? How has the author developed these characters?
- **Conflict** – What is the main struggle of the plot? How has this been presented?
- **Climax** – Where and what is the final main turning point of the story? How is it significant?
- **Speaker/Narrator** – What is the tone of the speaker is who telling the story? Is the narration done in first person/third person? Why did the author make these decisions?
- **Imagery** – How have images been used throughout the work? What does a particular image represent? Why has the author chosen to describe certain images in such detail?
- **Language** – Why have certain metaphors been used? How has the author used language to develop a major theme, character or mood?

TIP: Don't just identify these elements; ask *how* the author has incorporated them and *why* they were presented in such a way. The questions included above are examples of what you might ask. Ask these questions and your own questions when you try to interpret meaning.

When reading, pay attention to:

- Your initial response to the work or parts of the work
- Shifts in tone, character, plot, etc.
- Repetition of words, sounds (alliteration), images or motifs
- Patterns or contradictions in language or theme
- Any questions you have
- Connections you notice within the text
- Connections you notice between the text and other sources

For poetry, also look at:

- Rhyme scheme
- Metre
- Line breaks
- Punctuation
- Stanza breaks

Approaches to reading literature:

- **Historical or Cultural Criticism** – focuses on the context in which a literary work was created and how that context affects the work. It examines the author’s social, political, and intellectual surroundings.
- **Feminist Criticism** – focuses on the representation of gender in literature, especially in regards to women.
- **Reader-Response Criticism** – focuses on the reactions of an audience to a work of literature.
- **Deconstructive Criticism** – regards a work of literature skeptically, focusing on the multiple meanings of a work and what the text does not say.
- **Formalist Criticism** (aka New Criticism) – focuses primarily on a literary work as a constructed text – independent and without requiring extensive historical or cultural background.

Works Consulted:

- Aaron, Jane E., and Murray McArthur. *The Little, Brown Compact Handbook*. 3rd Canadian ed. Toronto: Pearson Longman, 2006. Print.
- Faigley, Lester, Roger Graves, and Heather Graves. *The Brief Penguin Handbook*. Canadian ed. Toronto: Pearson Education, 2008. Print.