



Narrative Elements Explained

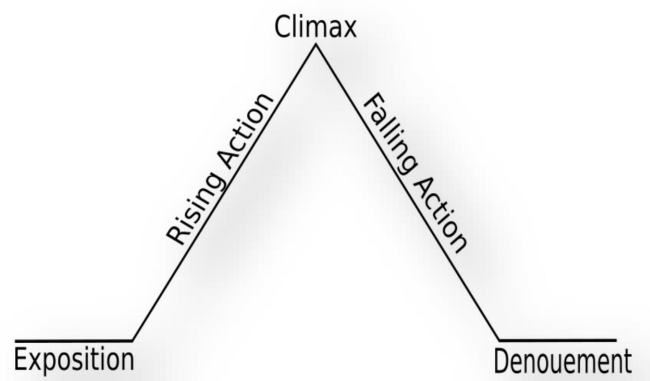
Fiction is best understood by breaking down and discussing terms common to most stories, whether they be novels, short fiction, movies, TV shows, or something else. These terms include: **theme, plot, characters, conflict, setting, point of view, and style**. Understanding how these elements work helps us better analyze narratives and determine meanings.

Theme

- **Definition:** Theme is the overarching idea that the writer of the story wants to reader to understand. All other literary concepts are used to support theme. The theme is the author's commentary on a subject; the theme extends beyond the text. It can often be found in other works or parts of life.
 - ⇒ **Example:** In Shakespeare's *Othello*, some of the major themes are appearance vs. reality, racial prejudice, love, and jealousy.
- **Questions to consider:** First identify the subject (s) (ex. humanity, love, death, good and evil, etc.) of the story and then ask: what is the writer trying to say about this subject? What literary tools does the writer use to support this theme? What was going on in the time that this work was written; do any of these events or issues present themselves in the story? What details does the author give you? What could the author want a reader to learn from this story?

Plot

- **Definition:** Plot is the structure of the narrative. Most narratives follow this traditional plot structure:
 - ⇒ **Exposition:** introduction of setting and characters.
 - ⇒ **Rising action:** events that build conflict for the protagonist (the main character).
 - ⇒ **Climax:** tension of conflict reaches highest, most intense point.
 - ⇒ **Falling action:** the events following the climax.
- **Questions to consider:** What is the relationship between the events of the story? How do the actions support or develop the theme of the story?





Characters

- **Definition:** Characters are the parties involved in the narrative. Literary analysis of characters often focuses on whether or not and to what extent a character changes throughout the story.
 - ⇒ **Protagonist:** The main or central character, often considered the hero. Example: Alice in *Alice in Wonderland*.
 - ⇒ **Antagonist:** The main character who opposes the protagonist is the antagonist, sometimes considered the villain. Example: Queen of Hearts from *Alice in Wonderland*.
- Characterization is the process of building, representing and establishing a character. This can be any detail that lets the reader know more about a character! Characterization can be direct or indirect, depending if the author tells the reader a character detail or shows the reader through some means.
 - ⇒ **Direct characterization:** John was short-tempered.
 - ⇒ **Indirect characterization:** John snapped at the man without warning.
- **Questions to consider:** What is the motivation of each character? How do characters grow or transform throughout the story? Or, do they fail to grow or change at all? What does their growth or lack of growth say about the theme of the story? What details are given about the character? How do these details add to the story?



Conflict

- **Definition:** Conflict refers to the issue or problem characters in a story are confronted by. The narrative is structured around how the characters face the conflict. The interaction between character and conflict creates the central effect of the story and is the main indicator of meaning. There are four types of conflict. Each is listed below, along with an example.
 - ⇒ **Person vs. person:** A couple going through a divorce.
 - ⇒ **Person vs. self:** Protagonist wrestling with depression.
 - ⇒ **Person vs. nature:** Protagonist trying to survive a natural disaster.
 - ⇒ **Person vs. society:** Protagonist fighting for civil rights.
- **Questions to consider:** How does the conflict affect the main characters in the story? How is the conflict resolved and what does the resolution say about theme? How does the conflict change the main characters?



Setting

- **Definition:** This element can refer to the time and place the story is set in. The location can either work symbolically or it can simply be a backdrop for the story to take place in. The setting helps ground the reader in the story and provides textual information that helps with analyzing and interpreting meaning.
 - ⇒ **Example:** In Edgar Allen Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher,” the Usher House represents the human mind. Poe personifies the house by describing it as having eyes that show depressions of the soul.
- **Questions to consider:** How does the location, time, and/or date of the story affect the theme? How does the setting affect how the characters respond to conflict? What is the physical environment like? What details are provided and how do they fit in to the rest of the story?

Point of View

- **Definition:** Refers to the perspective the story is told from. This element includes first-person, second-person, third-person limited and third-person omniscient narrators.
 - ⇒ **First-person:** Tells the story from the perspective of one or several characters with the word “I” or “we.” The readers, as if from their own eyes, can envision the characters actions. The perspective provides deeper insight into the character, sometimes even to the point of creating bias in the story. When a protagonist’s perspective warps the reality of the story, the protagonist is called an unreliable narrator.
 - ⇒ **Second-person:** Tells the story from the perspective of the reader or a separate character who is being addressed as “you.” This perspective is not used very often in writing. It allows the reader to immerse and take an active role in the story.
 - ⇒ **Third-person limited:** Tells the story from an outside perspective through one of the characters (usually the protagonist). The third-person limited narrator can relate events, thoughts, actions, but is limited to that single character. For example, if the narration is from the point of view of the protagonist, the narrator cannot relate events that are happening across town from where the protagonist is, nor can they relate the interior thoughts of any other character. Third person limited narration uses the pronouns “he,” “she,” or “they.”
 - ⇒ **Third-person omniscient:** Also tells the story from an outside perspective but this narrator is not limited to actions and thoughts of one character. This narrator knows all of the information of the story and can relate the events of the story, the actions and speech of each as well as the interior thoughts of any character. There are no limits for this narrator; they are all-knowing.



- **Questions to consider:** Does the narrator reflect an inner or an outer perspective on the story? Why did the author select this point of view? What would change if the story were told from a different point of view?

Style

- **Definition:** This element refers to the way the writer uses language including diction, voice, tone, sentence style, etc. Paying attention to these details allows the reader to identify how and why word choice and sentence style, etc. can help create the effect and meaning of the story.
- **Questions to consider:** Is the diction hard or simple to understand? Are the sentences short or complex? Why did the writer make these stylistic choices? How do these choices add or detract from the effect of the story? Does the language reflect the setting, does it reflect the time period or location that the author is writing in?

Note: Of course, these aren't the only literary devices narrative writers use to create their stories. Imagery, symbolism, metaphor, foreshadowing, and ambiguity, for example, are other important devices that should also be considered in the analysis of narratives. For more information, see our resource on [figurative language](#).

Further Assistance: For more detailed help or if you have questions, visit the Writing Center located in the Lewis University Library or call 815-836-5427.

Sources Consulted: Purdue Owl, *Writing About Literature* by Janet E. Gardner, "Fiction and Drama" by Dr. Jackie White, Grammarly