

How to Analyse a Fictional Text

1. What is a fictional text?

Fictional texts differ from non-fictional ones in that they were not primarily intended to convey information. Novels, short stories, plays, and poems were written for artistic purposes in order to appeal to the interested reader's imagination.

2. How do you approach a fictional text (order may depend on the individual case)?

- a. Read the text carefully at least twice.
- b. Write down your *first impressions* of the text which can be a very general idea, an important phrase, a characteristic feature of style, or the like.
- c. Look up unknown *vocabulary*. Concentrate only on key words that block the understanding of the text.
- d. Reread the excerpt and underline important passages, esp. those relevant for the tasks in a test paper.
- e. Structure your text according to *sense units*: How can the text be subdivided?
- f. Ask yourself the following questions:
What *literary genre* does the text in question belong to: poetry-drama-fiction?
- g. What is the story about? What is its main *theme*? What is its *central idea* / *meaning* / *message*? Can you state it in one single sentence?
- h. What *formal elements* of the text bring about the central meaning best?
- i. Start out with any of the characteristic formal elements which you found relevant for the understanding of the excerpt and analyse it.
The main question is: How does the author use this formal element so effectively that it can carry meaning and *contribute to the overall effect*?
- j. Analyse other formal elements of your choice and check whether your findings are true with respect to your initial ideas (points b and g).
- k. Perhaps you will have to *reformulate your central meaning* after the analyses of various aspects of the text. If necessary, do so because it will bring you closer to the *author's intention*.
- l. On your way through the whole process of interpretation, take the following formal elements into account:
action / plot; character, setting, atmosphere, point of view, tone, structure, choice of words, imagery and other stylistic devices
Remember that if a story is well-constructed, analyses of these elements will ultimately lead you to the core of the text in question because any element contributes a considerable bit to its overall meaning.

3. A few ideas on formal elements and what they stand for

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| <i>action</i> | What actually happens in the story? Situation? Developments? |
| <i>plot</i> | How is the action in the story organised? |
| <i>character</i> | Who is the protagonist? How is he characterised? Other characters? |
| <i>setting</i> | What is the place of the action presented? The time? The social circumstances? |
| <i>atmosphere</i> | What feelings does the narrative convey to the reader because of the description of setting, the choice of words, and the like? |
| <i>point of view</i> | Who tells the story (an observer, the protagonist, ...)? From what perspective is the story told (first person narration, third person narration, ...)? |
| <i>tone</i> | Is the story told in a serious, humorous, ironic, sentimental, or ... way? |
| <i>structure</i> | Are there different parts in the text? Any subdivisions? How does the action start? What conveys the text coherence? Is there an open ending / surprise ending? |
| <i>choice of words</i> | What register does the author employ to tell his story? |
| <i>imagery</i> | Does the author decorate his / her writing with comparisons, metaphors, symbols, personifications, ...? |

4. Additional questions

After a careful analysis of the text in question you might want to ask yourself a couple of very personal questions:

- Is the story convincing?
- Can I identify with any of the characters, their motives, their actions?
Can I understand their reactions?
- Do I like the story or not? Can I give any reasons for my decision?
- Is the material presented realistic or unrealistic?

If you are given tasks in a *term paper* or a *classroom test*, make sure that you stick to the rules of good and convincing writing in an *essay*. Giving proof of your findings is also essential. In preparation you should acquaint yourself with the *techniques of quoting* correctly from the original text (see “How to quote ...”).

Keep *enjoying reading* and writing about your ideas, and your teacher will enjoy reading your paper.