**How to Analyze a Short Story**

You will often be asked to write a literary analysis. An analysis of a short story requires a basic knowledge of literary elements. The following guide and questions may help you.

**What is a Short Story?**

A short story is a work of short, narrative prose that is usually centered around one single event. It is limited in scope and has an introduction, body and conclusion. Although a short story has much in common with a novel, it is written with much greater precision. You will often be asked to write a literary analysis. An analysis of a short story requires basic knowledge of literary elements. The following guide and questions may help you:

1. **Setting**

Setting is a description of where and when the story takes place. In a short story there are fewer settings compared to a novel. The time is more limited.

* How is the setting created? Consider geography, weather, time of day, social conditions, etc.
* What role does setting play in the story? Is it an important part of the plot or theme? Or is it just a backdrop against which the action takes place?

Study the time period which is also part of the setting.

* When was the story written?
* Does it take place in the present, the past, or the future?
* How does the time period affect the language, atmosphere or social circumstances of the short story?

1. **Characterization**

Characterization deals with how the characters in the story are described. In short stories there are usually fewer characters compared to a novel. They usually focus on one central character or protagonist.

* Who is the main character?
* Are the main character and other characters described through dialogue – by the way they speak (dialect or slang for instance)?
* Has the author described the characters by physical appearance, thoughts and feelings, and interaction (the way they act towards others)?
* Are they static/flat characters who do not change?
* Are they dynamic/round characters who DO change?
* What type of characters are they? What qualities stand out? Are they stereotypes?
* Are the characters believable?

1. **Plot and structure**

The plot is the main sequence of events that make up the story. In short stories the plot is usually centered around one experience or significant moment

* What is the most important event?
* How is the plot structured? Is it linear, chronological or does it move around?
* Is the plot believable?

1. **Narrator and Point of view**

The narrator is the person telling the story.   
Is the narrator and the main character the same?

By point of view we mean from whose eyes the story is being told. Short stories tend to be told through one character’s point of view

* Who is the narrator or speaker in the story?
* Does the author speak through the main character?
* Is the story written in the first person “I” point of view?
* Is the story written in a detached third person “he/she” point of view?
* Is there an “all-knowing” 3rd person who can reveal what all the characters are thinking and doing at all times and in all places?

1. **Conflict**

Conflict or tension is usually the heart of the short story and is related to the main character. In a short story there is usually one main struggle.

* How would you describe the main conflict?
* Is it an internal conflict within the character?
* Is it an external conflict caused by the surroundings or environment the main character finds himself/herself in?

1. **Climax**

The climax is the point of greatest tension or intensity in the short story. It can also be the turning point where events take a major turn as the story races towards its conclusion.

* Is there a turning point in the story?
* When does the climax take place?

1. **Theme**

The theme is the main idea, lesson or message in the short story. It is usually an abstract idea about the human condition, society or life.

* How is the theme expressed?
* Are any elements repeated that may suggest a theme?
* Is there more than one theme?

1. **Style**

The author’s style has to do with the author’s vocabulary, use of imagery, tone or feeling of the story. It has to do with his attitude towards the subject. In some short stories the tone can be ironic, humorous, cold or dramatic.

* Is his language full of figurative language?
* What images does he use?
* Does the author use a lot of symbolism? Metaphors (comparisons which do not use “as” or “like”, similes (comparisons which use “as” or “like”) ?

Your literary analysis of a short story will often be in the form of an essay where you may be asked to give your opinions of the short story at the end. Choose the elements that made the greatest impression on you. Point out which character/characters you liked best or least and always support your arguments.

A short story has a structure and a message. Can you analyze this picture in much the same way as a short story?

### Moral

Lastly, the reason you are reading the short story is to identify what you have learned from it and what the moral of the narrative is.

Even though short stories novels are crisp, interesting, and entertaining, there is always a life lesson behind each of them. This moral is implied to help the readers understand the author’s perspective, what they want to convey, and what lesson you should learn from the text.

### Symbolism

Authors use symbolism to convey messages poetically or indirectly, through their story, making it more interesting and a complex piece.

Symbolism is depicted using a physical object or even a person to be an abstract idea. For example, a dove represents love and peace or a storm represents hostility and turmoil.

Symbolism can also be used as metaphors in the narrative, such as life is a roller coaster which portrays life to have its ups and downs.

Similarly, in short story novels, authors symbolize certain conflicts and important issues by using a metaphor or a simile in their story. For example, in [Shakespeare’s](https://writersperhour.com/blog/how-to-write-a-shakespeare-essay) Julius Caesar, the officials dismantled the coronations of Caesar's statues, foreshadowing their plan to topple him.

Carol Dwankowski; Last updated 02/05/2018