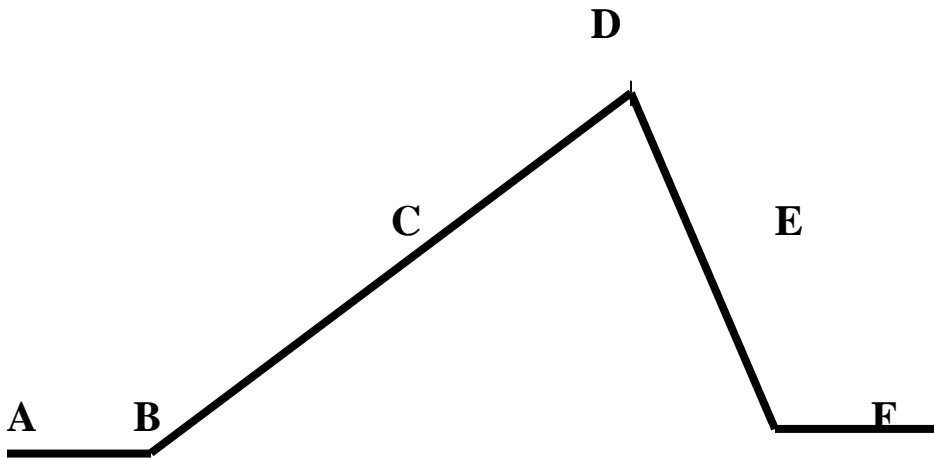


# The Elements of Fiction

*It is important to understand these terms in order to better understand the meanings of stories.*

1. **Plot** - the sequence of events or incidents of which the story is composed.



- **Plot diagram**
  - A. **Introduction or Exposition** - setting, characters, main conflicts are introduced to the reader; this is the beginning of a novel or story and may be short or long, but is always flat (little action or emotion).
  - B. **Complicating Incident** – This is the event which starts the conflict.
  - C. **Rising Action** - the round characters are developed, the conflicts are increased and acted out in many ways, motives are introduced, things happen; generally, the major part of a novel or story.
  - D. **Climax** - the "high point" of a story in which the major conflicts erupt in some kind of final showdown (fight, argument, violent or physical action, very tense emotional moment...); at the end of the climax, the "winner" will be clear (there is not always a winner!).
  - E. **Falling Action or denouement** - what events immediately follow the climax; a kind of "cleaning up."

F. **Resolution** - where everything ends; the reader may have some sense of "closure" or may be asked to think about what might come next; in fairy tales, the Happy Ending; in some novels, you will read about the characters many years later.

A. **Conflict** is a clash of actions, ideas, desires or wills.

- a. person against person.
- b. person against environment - external force, physical nature, society, or "fate."
- c. person against herself/himself - conflict with some element in her/his own nature; maybe physical, mental, emotional, or moral.

B. Artistic Unity - essential to a good plot; nothing irrelevant that does not contribute to the total meaning; nothing that is there only for its own sake or its own excitement.

C. Plot Manipulation and Fabulation - a good plot should not have any unjustified or unexpected turns or twists, no false leads, and no deliberate and misleading information; fabulation is the introduction of the fabulous or unrealistic or gothic elements in an otherwise realistic setting.

D. Story Ending: In a Happy Ending the stereotypical expectation is that the protagonist must solve all the problems, defeat the villain, win the girl, and live happily everafter. Unfortunately, many real life situations have unhappy endings; for the writers of serious fiction, the unhappy endings are more likely to raise significant issues concerning life and living.

## 2. Character

A. **Direct Presentation** - author tells us straight out, by exposition or analysis, or through another character.

B. **Indirect Presentation** - author shows us the character in action; the reader infers what a character is like from what she/he thinks, or says, or does. These are also called dramatized characters and they are generally consistent (in behavior), motivated (convincing), and plausible (lifelike).

C. Character Types - a **Flat** character is known by one or two traits; a Round character is complex and many-sided; a **Stock** character is a stereotyped character (a mad scientist, the absent-minded professor, the cruel mother-in-law); a **Static** character remains the same from the beginning of the plot to the end; and a **Dynamic** (developing) character undergoes permanent change. This change must be a. within the possibilities of the character; b. sufficiently motivated; and c. allowed sufficient time for change.

D. Protagonist and Antagonist - the protagonist is the central character, sympathetic or unsympathetic. The forces working against her/him, whether persons, things, conventions of society, or traits of their own character, are the antagonists.

3. **Theme** - the controlling idea or central insight. It can be 1. a revelation of human character; 2. may be stated briefly or at great length; and 3. a theme is not the "moral" of the story.

A. A theme must be expressible in the form of a statement - not "motherhood" but "Motherhood sometimes has more frustration than reward."

B. A theme must be stated as a generalization about life; names of characters or specific situations in the plot are not to be used when stating a theme.

C. A theme must not be a generalization larger than is justified by the terms of the story.

D. A theme is the central and unifying concept of the story. It must adhere to the following requirements: 1. It must account for all the major details of the story. 2. It must not be contradicted by any detail of the story. 3. It must not rely on supposed facts - facts not actually stated or clearly implied by the story.

E. There is no one way of stating the theme of a story.

F. Any statement that reduces a theme to some familiar saying, aphorism, or cliché should be avoided. Do not use "A stitch in time saves nine," "You can't judge a book by its cover," "Fish and guests smell in three days," and so on.

| [Top](#) | 4. **Points Of View**

A. **Omniscient** - a story told by the author, using the third person; the author's knowledge, control, and prerogatives are unlimited; authorial subjectivity.

B. **Limited Omniscient** - a story in which the author associates with a major or minor character; this character serves as the author's spokesperson or mouthpiece.

C. **First Person** - the author identifies with or disappears in a major or minor character; the story is told using the first person "I". Interior Monologue -- 1st person, train of thought or stream of consciousness. Subjective Narration-- 1st person, narrator seems unreliable, tries to get us to share their side, or assume values or views we don't share. Detached Autobiography -- 1st person, narrator is reliable, guides reader. Narrator is main character, often reflecting on a past "self." Memoir or Observer Narration -- 1st person, narrator is observer rather than main participant; narrator can be confident, eye-witness or "chorus" (provides offstage or background information); Narrator can be reliable or unreliable.

D. **Objective or Dramatic** - the opposite of the omniscient; displays authorial objectivity; compared a roving sound camera. Very little of the past or the future is given; the story is set in the present. It has the most speed and the most action; it relies heavily on external action and dialogue, and it offers no opportunities for interpretation by the author.

5. **Symbol** - a literary symbol means more than what it is. It has layers of meanings. Whereas an image has one meaning, a symbol has many.

A. Names used as symbols. B. Use of objects as symbols. C. Use of actions as symbols.

**Note:** The ability to recognize and interpret symbols requires experience in literary readings, perception, and tact. It is easy to "run wild" with symbols -

to find symbols everywhere. The ability to interpret symbols is essential to the full understanding and enjoyment of literature. Given below are helpful suggestions for identifying literary symbols:

**1.** The story itself must furnish a clue that a detail is to be taken symbolically - symbols nearly always signal their existence by emphasis, repetition, or position. **2.** The meaning of a literary symbol must be established and supported by the entire context of the story. A symbol has its meaning inside not outside a story. **3.** To be called a symbol, an item must suggest a meaning different in kind from its literal meaning. **4.** A symbol has a cluster of meanings.

**6. Irony** - a term with a range of meanings, all of them involving some sort of discrepancy or incongruity. It should not be confused with sarcasm which is simply language designed to cause pain. Irony is used to suggest the difference between appearance and reality, between expectation and fulfillment, the complexity of experience, to furnish indirectly an evaluation of the author's material, and at the same time to achieve compression.

- A. Verbal irony - the opposite is said from what is intended.
- B. Dramatic irony - the contrast between what a character says and what the reader knows to be true.
- C. Irony of situation - discrepancy between appearance and reality, or between expectation and fulfillment, or between what is and what would seem appropriate.

## | [Top](#) | **Study Questions**

**Plot:** 1. What are the conflicts? Are they physical, intellectual, moral, or emotional? Is the main conflict between sharply differentiated good and evil, or is it more subtle and complex? 2. Does the plot have unity? Are all the episodes relevant to the total meaning or effect of the story? Is the ending happy, unhappy, or indeterminate? Is it fairly achieved?

**Character:** 1. Who is the protagonist and who or what are the antagonists? 2. Are the characters consistent in their actions? Adequately motivated? Plausible? Does the author successfully avoid stock characters?

**Theme:** 1. Does the story have a theme? What is it? Is it implicit or explicit? 2. Does the theme reinforce or oppose popular notions of life? Does it furnish a new insight or refresh or deepen an old one?

**Point of View:** 1. What point of view does the story use? Is it consistent in its use of this point of view? If shifts are made, are they justified? 2. If the point is that of one of the characters, does that character have any limitations that affect her/his interpretation of events or persons?

**Symbol:** Does the story make use of symbols? What kinds (names, objects, actions) are they? If so, do they carry or merely reinforce the meaning of the story?

**Irony:** Does the story anywhere utilize irony of situation? Dramatic irony? Verbal irony? What functions do the ironies serve?