Annotating a Work of Fiction

Owl: Welcome to Annotating a Work of Fiction, an instructional video on reading comprehension brought to you by the Excelsior College Online Writing Lab.

0:15 Reading a work of fiction, such as a short story, play, or novel, can be easier if you know what to look for and annotate while you read.

0:24 When reading a work of fiction, you should look for several key elements.

0:29 First, make a note of the major characters.

0:32 Many times there is a main character, or protagonist, who is the focus of the story.

0:39 The protagonist may be a hero or anti-hero, someone who is flawed but still fulfills the role of the hero.

0:47 There may also be an antagonist, someone who is opposed to the main character.

0:53 Every story has a setting, a place and time where the story unfolds.

0:59 The setting may be historical or invented.

1:03 Every story also has a plot.

1:06 The plot is the action that unfolds throughout the story.

1:09 Traditionally, a story plot centers around a conflict and a resolution.

1:15 A common plot formula has five stages.

1:18 It begins with an exposition that introduces the characters, setting, and events leading up to the story.

1:25 It then goes through a series of events known as the rising action during which conflict escalates.

1:33 This leads to a climax that marks a turning point for the main character or characters.

1:38 Afterwards comes the period of falling action during which conflicts are resolved.

1:45 Finally, the plot ends with a resolution that concludes the story.

1:51 As stories, works of fiction have a narrator who tells the story from a particular point of view.

1:57 There are different types of point of view.

2:00 For instance, a story with first-person point of view is told by a particular character and uses the pronoun “I” or “we” to tell the story.

2:10 A story with second-person point of view features the reader as the main character and uses the pronoun “you.”

2:16 While less common, this point of view is featured in choose-your-own-adventure books.

2:22 Finally, a story with third-person point of view is told by a character or entity who has privileged knowledge of the main character; this narrator uses the pronouns “he,” “she,” or “they” to tell the story.

2:37 The third-person narrator is sometimes called the omniscient narrator because of its privileged knowledge of events and characters’ thoughts.
Every narrator also has a particular tone. For instance, Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* is told by a narrator with a humorous and satirical tone.

On the other hand, the narrator in George Orwell’s *1984* has a serious and even tragic tone.

The narrator’s tone helps establish the feeling and meaning of the story.

Finally, every story has one or more themes that it develops.

A theme is a major idea expressed by a story.

For instance, the *Myth of Sisyphus* conveys the theme that human endeavor is ultimately futile, whereas Takikiji Kobayashi’s “The Cannery Boat” emphasizes the theme of working-class unity leading to successful resistance to oppression.

Look for these elements as you read and identify them with a highlight, underline, or margin note.

Let’s try this with the short story “The Story of an Hour” by Kate Chopin.

Write the main characters in the margin:

Louise Mallard

Brently Mallard, husband

Josephine, sister

Richards, friend of Brently

Describe the setting:

Late nineteenth century at the Mallard residence

Define the point of view:

Third-person omniscient

...And the tone:

Ironic (characters misinterpret Louise’s behavior)

Finally, list the key themes:

freedom,

selfhood,

self-fulfillment,

and the meaning of love

A good way to keep track of the major elements of a story is to construct a story map either during or after you read.

A story map will help you identify the major elements of a story and remember them for later, say when it comes time to write about the story or take a quiz.

Click here to watch a video about how to make a story map.

Following these simple steps will help you improve your ability to read and understand works of fiction like short stories, plays, and novels.

If you need help understanding common literary devices found in works of fiction, such as metaphors and symbols, you may also want to take a look at our instructional video on Understanding Figurative Language.
Thanks for listening to this instructional video on Annotating a Work of Fiction!

Visit the Excelsior College Online Writing Lab for more support with reading and writing skills.