Annotating a Work of Fiction

0:00 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.
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.

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,
selhhood,
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.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Description</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4:36</td>
<td>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.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4:45</td>
<td>Click here to watch a video about how to make a story map.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4:50</td>
<td>Following these simple steps will help you improve your ability to read and understand works of fiction like short stories, plays, and novels.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5:00</td>
<td>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.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5:15</td>
<td>Thanks for listening to this instructional video on Annotating a Work of Fiction!</td>
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<tr>
<td>5:21</td>
<td>Visit the Excelsior College Online Writing Lab for more support with reading and writing skills.</td>
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