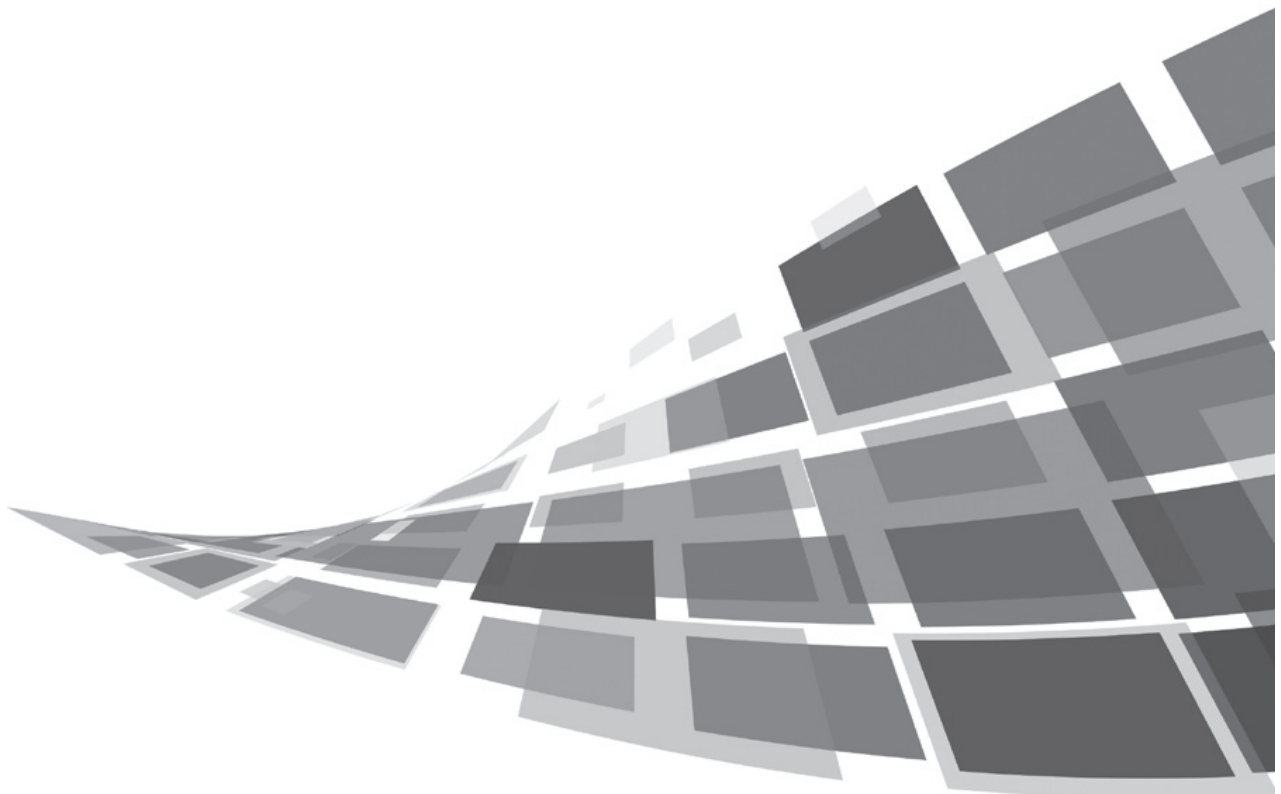


1 | **Accessing the Text**

Methods for Analysis



Not every piece of fiction has an obvious meaning, but even those that do are subject to misinterpretation if the reader is paying more attention to her/his beliefs than to what the author is saying. So, how, exactly, do you take this complex collection of words that, like life, only offers a portion of any picture – only *some* of the information – and figure out what the text implies or suggests? In broad strokes, the answer is that you must combine the **explicit** information to understand the patterns of the text that will, in turn, offer access to the **implicit** information because – and here’s the crucial information that you must remember – the meaning of the text and thus the thesis of your essay must be based on that **implicit** information. (Explicit means directly stated, and implicit means implied but not directly stated.) However, to begin any discussion of how to analyze a text we need to agree on the vocabulary we will be using, and in literature, a major portion of that vocabulary is based in literary devices.

1.1 Literary Devices

There are literally hundreds of literary devices, most of which I will not list here, but I will offer you a list of those literary devices I find most useful and without which a precise discussion of a text becomes almost impossible. It’s worth noting at this point that, despite their importance, literary devices are only tools and vehicles; they are means – not ends – and therefore seldom serve as a focus for an essay. I recognize that there are theories of teaching that place literary devices in a more central position, but I would suggest that an essay that centers on a literary device is an exercise in understanding literary devices rather than a complete exploration of the story or novel. Still, every teacher is different and teaches different skills, and my first advice to any student is to always follow the teacher’s instructions, as that teacher is your best resource and sets the terms and standards of the class.

Literary devices offer specific information to the reader, in particular, the knowledge of what some element of the story is **doing**: i.e. all elements (all words and sentences) of a story are performing a task and by recognizing which literary device is at play, you can recognize what the words are **doing**. In other words, when you recognize a sentence offers information about a character and term that sentence as characterization, you are creating a discussion about what those words – that sentence – **does** in the text: it creates a portrait of a person (the character).

This ability to organize is the first step to understanding the meaning of the text. As such, you need to understand the literary vocabulary you must use, so I'll begin with the list of terms and definitions.

1. **Motif:** a repeated element of the story (usually one word) that suggests possible themes through repetition, but motifs are an umbrella term in that their **only criteria is repetition**. As a result, because the definition is so broad, many other literary devices will also fall under the umbrella of a single motif because, in a well written text, repetition always indicates importance, and importance is played out through the tasks that indicate other literary devices such as characterization or plot. So, most motifs do double duty. In other words, a motif is a motif because it is repeated, but it is repeated because it is doing another task like creating characterization or setting.
2. **Plot:** what happens in the story. Plot has recognizable structures, a knowledge of which can be used to organize your approach to the text. All plots include conflict, whether large or small, and that conflict will result in a moment of crisis, at which point the stakes of the text will become clear. In finding that moment of crisis (also called climax), you will also find what it is that is important in the text and how far the character will go to gain what is important. If you then include the story's ending, you will understand what that action outlined in the crisis has cost the character. A statement that outlines this information will be a central theme.
3. **Characterization:** offers information about the character, but think outside the box because characterization is **anything** that offers information about the character not just the obvious categories such as description and dialogue. Even a detail about setting or plot is characterization if it offers information about the character.
4. **Setting:** like characterization, setting is **anything** that offers information about the time and place of a story.
5. **Irony:** a non-literal statement that is intended to create emphasis. Because irony is a statement that the reader is supposed to understand as different – usually as opposite – to the literal meaning, you need to be particularly well versed in recognizing irony. The good news is most of us practice irony everyday in the form of sarcasm, like when you've had a bad day, but you answer sharply that you're "great" to any inquiry

of “how are you?” In doing so, you’re employing sarcasm/irony to point out just how bad your day was. Irony in a text is also an indicator of emphasis.

6. **Paradox:** a moment in a text when two separate items of knowledge seem oppositional but are equally true. In literature, a moment of paradox is of particular importance because it inevitably means the reader is missing information. Paradox **seems** to call rationality into question; however, in most cases when we see a character (or a person in life) acting irrationally, we simply do not understand the goal of the action. For instance, if a fiscally unstable person were to go out and lease an expensive car, we might state that s/he is acting irrationally, yet it’s likely the goal of the lease is not to become more fiscally sound; rather, the goal must be to create an impression of wealth. As such, the act may be misguided, but it’s not irrational, and in concluding the action is irrational, we simply haven’t understood the goal or the motivation. The same is true in literature; if a character seems to be acting paradoxically, or if the text is offering impossible scenarios, we have to assume we are missing information. Even in genre such as magic realism, where the impossible is the point, those impossible occurrences work together to create meaning, so whatever analysis reflects all sides of the paradox will be the foundation of a theme. In other words, keep an eye on whatever paradox you notice because they indicate the presence of implicit information, and all theses and topic sentences are dependant on implicit information.
7. **Metaphor:** a comparison using the verb to be. Metaphor theory is complex, but for the purposes of this text, I’ll ask you to look at metaphor as a replacement of one thing for another – a rose for a girl, for instance – that offers new information about the original object, person, place, or action and uses or at least implies the verb “to be.” In other words, in stating the metaphor that “Jane is a rose,” we become aware of a series of Jane’s attributes, including beauty, scent, delicacy, etc., because in using the metaphor, the attributes of the rose are transferred to Jane. As well, although I won’t list them here separately, you should also be aware of the three other tropes (methods of literary comparison): simile (comparison with “like” or “as”), synecdoche (part for a whole: in the phrase “all hands on deck,” hands replace sailors), and metonym (closely related object for a person or object: crown for king).

8. **Symbol:** a replacement of an abstract with a material object or action. Symbols are difficult to use because they can seem deceptively simple and are often taught as a one to one replacement using a material object or action to indicate an abstract idea (rock for strength). In fact, symbols are usually far more complex. For the purposes of this discussion, remember that symbols use material objects or actions to characterize abstract ideas, so anything that “is” a symbol must be a material object or action. As well, although symbols are enticing to essay writers, they are never the means to prove an idea; they’re the result of proof. Finally, symbols do not, by definition, directly correspond, so you cannot say that a funeral is symbolic of a last rite because a funeral is a last rite. To make the statement accurate, you would at least need to change the scale, so a single funeral might be considered to stand in for all last rites. All of this to say, make sure that if you include a symbol in your essay, that you **are**, in fact, discussing a symbol and that the discussion comes **after** you’ve established the reasons for your claim.
9. **Theme:** a meaning of a text. The most important attribute of a theme is that it is **never one word**. When asked to identify a theme, the most common mistakes students make is to give a one-word answer, but a one-word answer never offers enough information and is much too broad: if I’ve been told that the theme of a text is greed, from that single word I can’t know if we are talking about the greed of a rapacious business tycoon or the old man who covets his neighbor’s rose bush. To understand a theme, we need more information. When a student tells me that the theme of a text is “greed” or “jealousy” or “honor,” the student is actually offering a **topic** rather than a theme. To become a theme, that topic must be placed in context: you must be able to identify what it is that **this story says about that topic**. As well, for the purposes of this text, the word theme and thesis are to some degree interchangeable; the theme becomes a thesis when put into place in a thesis statement of an essay. Finally, I suggest that my students use one of two forms of themes to ensure that their thesis is active: a statement of cause and effect or a definition of an abstract, but I’ll cover this more completely in chapter two.

As mentioned earlier, there are many more literary devices, but these nine are the ones this guide will employ most commonly, with the motif acting as umbrella term and center to many discussions.

1.2 Where and How to Access a Text

Too often – especially when a time constraint creates pressure – we reach the end of a story and have no real understanding of the point. Given time and a second, or even a third, reading, we will certainly figure it out, but time isn't always available. In this section, I'm going to offer you methods for quick decoding. All of them can be used for decoding when you have more time, but when you are in the position of a timed essay like Quebec's English Exit Exam (and many other literacy tests), they are invaluable methods. To begin, I'm including Stephen Crane's story "The Veteran" on which most examples in this text are based. I suggest you read the story and then move on to the methods for analysis.

"The Veteran" by Stephen Crane

Out of the low window could be seen three hickory trees placed irregularly in a meadow that was resplendent in spring-time green. Farther away, the old, dismal belfry of the village church loomed over the pines. A horse, meditating in the shade of one of the hickories, lazily swished his tail. The warm sunshine made an oblong of vivid yellow on the floor of the grocery.

"Could you see the whites of their eyes?" said the man, who was seated on a soap box.

"Nothing of the kind," replied old Henry warmly. "Just a lot of flitting figures, and I let go at where they 'peared to be the thickest. Bang!"

"Mr. Fleming," said the grocer—his deferential voice expressed somehow the old man's exact social weight—"Mr. Fleming, you never was frightened much in them battles, was you?"

The veteran looked down and grinned. Observing his manner, the entire group tittered. "Well, I guess I was," he answered finally. "Pretty well scared, sometimes. Why, in my first battle I thought the sky was falling down. I thought the world was coming to an end. You bet I was scared."