

Honors Literature and Short Stories Week 1

Analyzing Setting and Character

When we write about how the characters develop and how the setting and mood are created – thus enhancing a story, this is called *analysis*.

- The first step, of course, is to read the assigned story. While reading the story, make notes of the words and details that create setting, mood, and character. Margin notes (jotting notes in the margin of what you are reading) or sticky notes are a good way to do this. As you make notes, don't just mark down the words, add your own notes that show what picture you are creating in your mind for setting, mood and character.
- The next step is to take these notes and details and put them together into one or more paragraphs (or an essay as we develop more skills).

Setting

Setting is the time and place in which story events happen. The author includes the “Where” and “When?” aspects of the story. A good author enlists the reader's senses to describe or to portray the setting. What do you SEE, HEAR, TOUCH, SMELL, TASTE?

Notice the many methods the author uses to relay setting. Rather than describing the desert on a hot day, perhaps he talks about the character's parched throat, searching for water, the blazing sun, cloudless sky, and more. This gets across the message that it is HOT. Did the author need to come right out and tell the reader that it is HOT? Not directly. It is much more interesting when the author allows his reader to reach that obvious conclusion.

Remember that setting includes the “When” aspect as well. What time period is being portrayed in the story? How do you know? If the story is in the present, the author may refer to well-known places and to styles and activities that will let the reader know this. Is it set in the past? The author will include clues and direct description of details that will let the reader know this.

The setting is vital for a story. It is the painting for the background on which the characters will perform. Without setting, the characters are on a blank canvas and the reader is unable to really become part of the story.

Mood

Related to setting is Mood. When we read a good story we can actually FEEL the emotions. We might feel anxious or frightened. We might actually feel the gloom or the excitement of the scene. This is the MOOD. A good writer must be able to set the scene and make the audience feel it. Just as an artist would use paint and color to create a sense of mood in a picture, an author can do the same with words in a story. Think of words that create feelings of apprehension, excitement, fear, helplessness, anticipation.

Mood can be created using descriptions of the surroundings as you have learned in the **Setting** section. But it can also be created in the sentence style. For instance, short, choppy sentences, while usually not the best way to write, can be extremely effective in setting the reader off balance. This type of writing can create the feeling of rapid action or excitement.

She climbed the ladder. She jumped. Her scream pierced the air. Slowly she seemed to drift towards the water; time seemed to stand still.

Notice that the first three sentences give you the feeling of quick action. The last sentence draws you in and slows you down... just as it would in real life.

Factors to Establish Mood

The **mood** in your story will be established by controlling the following factors:

1. Setting:
This could be the area (such as the beach) or a specific place (a house, castle, etc.), a city, etc.
2. Character attitude toward place, situation, and other characters.
How a character feels in different locations. Sad, nervous, happy, secure.....
3. Prior events:
What has happened to the character or the location in the past?
4. Colors and patterns:
Descriptions of places – dusty windows.... Rolling green hills Long, straight, asphalt highway....
5. The orientation and size of structures:
Is the car confining? Do buildings loom overhead? Is the road rutted and narrow?
6. Lights and shadows:
Sun hidden behind clouds.... Rain blocking out all light.... Murky light coming through dusty windows...shadows cast by candles.... Flashlight beam weakening...
7. Sentence length and variety:
We've talked about this...
8. Word choice:
Use of words that give specific meanings and feelings...
9. Movement:
Wind rushing.....river water rising..... cars zipping by....waves pounding....
10. Dialogue:
Character talking to self. Characters talking among each other.
11. Narrator attitude
The author should try not to seem sympathetic to his character –instead, he should try to be objective.

How to write about setting and mood:

Note setting details from throughout the book

Keep a notepad next to you as you read. Whenever you read a detail that indicates something about the time or place of the story, jot it down (along with the page number). These will often be just tiny details – perhaps something in a line that says a cloud of dust followed the car as it drove down the road. This cloud of dust indicates the road is dirt and it is dry. As you put all of the details in the story together, you will be amazed at the full picture you develop!

Write in the PRESENT TENSE

The first thing to know about writing about literature is to write in the present tense. Present tense means that we write as if the story is happening now.

Introduce the title and author

When we begin writing about a book or short story, we introduce the title and the author of the book. The **title of a book** is always underlined or *italicized* – either way is acceptable, as long as it is consistent. The **title of a short story** is always put in quotation marks. Each word of the title, except for articles (the, a, an), prepositions (of, in, on, for etc.), and conjunctions (but, and, so) begins with a capital letter. If the article, preposition or conjunction is the first word of the title or the last word of the title, it also begins with a capital letter.

Examples of book titles:

To Kill a Mockingbird by Harper Lee

Freak the Mighty by Rodman Philbrick

Examples of short story titles:

“Gimpel the Fool” by Isaac Singer

“The Chrysanthemums” by John Steinbeck

The sentence that introduces the title and the author for setting gives a brief overall picture of the setting (time and place) of the book.

Introducing the title and author is accomplished in different ways:

To Kill a Mockingbird, by Harper Lee, is set in the small town of Maycomb, Alabama in the 1930s.

Harper Lee, sets her novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, in the small town of Maycomb, Alabama in the 1930s.

“Gimpel the Fool”, by Isaac Singer is set in.....

Writing about setting STEP-BY-STEP

1. Gather details from throughout the book.
2. Begin with a topic sentence as described above. This will include the author’s name and title of the book. *Note: If the time period of the book is not clearly stated, see if you can determine if it from what you have read. If you still cannot determine it, leave it off.*
3. Write several sentences describing the broad setting of the book – that is, the region, the town and the time period. Use specific examples from the book that help you determine this. When you include a quote from the book, you will need to put the page number in parenthesis after the quote.

4. Write several sentences describing the season in which the story takes place. If it takes place over a period of time, describe the seasons or other time indicators. Describe the weather, using details from the book. Use specific examples from the book that help you determine this.
5. Write several sentences describing the primary PLACES in the book. For instance, describe the house in which someone lives, if that is important. If the setting is a campsite near a river, describe this setting in detail. Include sensory details such as colors, smells, etc. that you have gathered from throughout the book. Use specific examples from the book that help you determine this.
6. Write several sentences to describe other places that are important to the story. Perhaps a certain street, a path through the forest, a different town or city that is visited. Use specific examples from the book.
7. Write a closing sentence that ties back to your opening sentence – one that will remind your reader that you are describing the setting of the book.

Putting it all together – **make sure to paragraph when you change ideas:**

The Stolen Poodle Case, by Megan Crawly, is set in the quiet town of Wanshoe, Illinois, around the 1970s. Wanshoe is a rural town in the southern part of Illinois. From the description of the characters, their language, and the date the story was written, it appears to take place in the 1970's. Marcia, one of the main characters, sadly tells her friends, "the Grateful Dead are going to be coming to New York, but not here!" (64). While the story begins in winter, as Marcia "grabbed her parka before running out into the snow", it continues through the spring as well. She also "sighed in relief as the buds on the trees finally poked through the remaining snow" (89). The trees and flowers and open meadows creates a beautiful image of a rural community.

Marcia lives near a stream down a bumpy dirt road. She has "lived there all her life and knew no other place" (25). The fresh breezes fill her house with scents from the river as well as the surrounding spring wildflowers.

The barn where the kidnappers eventually trap Marcia is prominent in the story. It is at the back of a large, old ranch, and is not longer used by the owner. "The once red paint now hung in long peeling strips" from the rickety boards (76). Entering the barn, the first thing she notices is the deep, musty smell. Dirt floors have traces of long rotten hay, and cobwebs hang from every corner. One flimsy ladder leads to a loft, which ends up being where the three are eventually trapped. The barn seems a scary place.

While the small town of Wanshoe often seems boring to Marcia, each place creates an interesting image of rural life as the background to the suspenseful short story.

Character

Your *character* is everything that makes YOU be YOU. This includes your **physical characteristics** such as hair color, hair length, hair style or texture, eye color, skin color and

tone, height, build, coordination. It also includes your **personality traits**, such as your sense of humor, friendliness, honesty, generosity, leadership, self-confidence, compassion, competitiveness, temper – or lack of any of these qualities. It also includes your **personal history**, such as your religious background, your educational background, economic background, family background, ethnic background, medical background. Finally, it also includes things we learn about you through your **possessions**, such as, your hobbies and collections, pets, clothing, home, music, car, athletic equipment, books.

Now, if we made a list of all of these things, we would have a pretty good picture of you, but it wouldn't be very interesting to read. As you read a book or a story, the author will gradually reveal little things about the character. The author won't TELL us everything about the character in one spot, and the author won't always come right out and TELL the characteristics. Instead, we may read in the beginning of the book a piece of dialogue between a character and someone else that shows him complaining. As the story progresses, we may see other signs that the character complains a lot – perhaps through the eyes of other people or more description of the character. Another character in a book may be shown throughout the book doing a wide variety of daring activities or taking chances. This builds the character in our mind and we know one characteristic of this person is her boldness and daring. Of course, from reading of her adventures, we will also be able to tell if she is foolishly daring or if she is careful and thinks about things first.

Methods:

1. Telling it right out.
example: She was tall and slender. She loved to read and to write stories.
2. Using actions, behaviors, events.
example: John thought the wind could blow her over if it was strong enough.
Her favorite place was the library where she could always be found in a corner with a book, completely unaware of the passage of time.
3. Using the words of the character or the words of another character.
example: "I wish you would put down your pen and listen to your family instead of spending all of your hours writing!"

"I know you are the only one of us who could reach the top shelf!"

4. Revealing what the character is feeling or thinking.
examples:
She hoped that these girls would be different and not tease her about her height. After all, how could she have any control over that?

Daddy was six feet two inches tall, and she was only slightly shorter.

Mother's spicy temper seemed to be all that she had passed on.....

5. Showing how other characters respond to a character.
example: Sam turned away in fright from her ruined face. The dog growled refused to come closer.

So, it is important that the author incorporate different ways of **SHOWING** the reader about the character rather than simply **TELLING** us. A good writer will use a variety of methods to do this.

In a book, we will also see the development or changes in a character. These may be for the good or for the worse, but a good author helps us see his character change.

Physical characteristics are also revealed throughout the book. Sometimes an author will describe a character right away. However, more often, the writer will reveal physical characteristics in subtle ways as the story progresses. Maybe one line refers to the character jumping up from the table, her black curls bouncing. Later, a reference may be made to her looking up at her friend – which indicates she might be short. By gathering all of the little details from the book, you will create a complete picture of the character.

How to write about character:

Note character details from throughout the book

Keep a notepad next to you as you read. Whenever you read a detail that indicates anything about the character, jot it down. By the time you finish, you will have a surprisingly complete picture of the character's appearance, personality, and background.

Write in the PRESENT TENSE

The first thing to know about writing about books is to write in the present tense. Present tense means that we write as if the story is happening now.

Introduce the title and author

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Introducing the title and author is accomplished in different ways:

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Harper Lee, sets her novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, in the small town of Maycomb, Alabama in the 1930's.

“Gimpel the Fool”, by Isaac Singer tells the story of a man who...

Writing about character STEP-BY-STEP

1. Gather details from throughout the book as explained earlier.
2. Begin with a topic sentence as described above. This will include the author's name and title of the book. It will probably also include a second sentence, if necessary, to identify the specific character you will be discussing.
3. Write several sentences describing the overall characteristics of the character.
4. Write a couple sentences about how and if Marcia develops or changes over the course of the story.
5. Write a closing sentence that ties back to your opening sentence – one that will remind your reader that you are describing the character of the book.

Putting it all together – **make sure to paragraph when you change ideas:**

In *The Stolen Poodle Case*, Megan Crawley creates characters who soon become “friends” to the reader. One such character is Marcia Williams, one of a trio of friends who work together to solve a mystery. Marcia is a tall redhead who always checks the consequences of her actions before she does anything. This characteristic often saves her and her friends from trouble. As a track star in her local high school, she has developed a strong body and fast running skills, which save her more than once in the adventures. Her small room is filled with trophies and medals, but also, surprisingly, with a vast collection of butterflies. She is always friendly, but a bit bossy to her two best friends, Martin and Anthony, but it does not seem to bother them. Her family does not have a great deal of money, and she works to help supplement her family income. She is very responsible and generous as she gives all of her money to her parents. Marcia dresses in jeans and tee shirts most of the time, but enjoys putting together outfits from the local thrift store. At the start of the book, Marcia tends to be reluctant to proceed in any dangerous situation. However, as the story progresses, she becomes aware that in order for things to change, she must become involved. As a result, her personality becomes more determined and more comfortable with different situations. The character of Marcia Williams provides a good balance to the other characters in the story, a character who would be a welcome friend to the reader.

Journal Expectations

You will need to keep a journal on your literature reading. You may want to handwrite this in a notebook, however, you will need to type it up and keep this journal in Word. You will almost always be reading a story or book that I have assigned to you. Each day, as you read some of the book, you will need to record in your journal your interpretations of your reading, your reactions, and your analysis of what you are reading. This is not a summary of the book. Every Friday you will need to e-mail me your Journal. Keep it all together, date each entry, and include the name of the book/story and the pages you are covering (if it is a book). This is not graded for grammar or writing conventions. I may sometimes write you a note back with a question for you to think about, but in general, I am looking to see that you are writing your interpretations, reactions, analysis.

Weekly Shorts

Each week you will have a short, fun assignment to be completed by Friday. You will not be graded on these, except to show that you have done them. Each one is worth 5 points. We will share these each week with the class. This is your opportunity to have fun with writing! Each one should be approximately one page in length.

Assignments

Read the following short stories:

The Sniper by Liam O’Flaherty

<http://www.classicshorts.com/stories/sniper.html>

Harrison Bergeron by Kurt Vonnegut (character – human nature)

<http://www.tnellen.com/cybereng/harrison.html>

Gimpel the Fool by Isaac Singer

<http://salvoblue.homestead.com/gimpel.html>

1. Write a paragraph **one** of the stories and discuss setting and mood. Be sure to clearly explain why and how the setting and mood contribute to the story. **Due this week**
25 points
2. Write a paragraph on another of the stories and discuss character – choose one character to discuss. Clearly show whether the character is flat or dynamic (changing according to experiences), and how he contributes to the strength of the story. **Due this week** **25 points**
3. Do an internet search for the author of “The Sniper” – Liam O’Flaherty. Write a short paragraph which provides details of his life that you feel are related to “The Sniper”. (Refer to the Documentation handout I have sent for citing your sources)
Due this week **25 points**

4. **Weekly Shorts:** Letter to someone asking for a job (**be funny, creative**) **5 points**
For this one you WILL need to put it in the correct business letter format –
See: http://www.wisc.edu/writing/Handbook/BusLetter_Block.html

5. **Journal:** Begin reading Watership Down by Richard Adams (you will have three weeks to complete the book). **10 points** Each week you will write an entry on the book. Hive? entry #1: *see the Close Reading handout for description of what you should be including.* Be sure also to carefully note allegories and symbols. You may want to look ahead to Week 4 to review the topics for the essay you will be writing. This often helps you to direct your responses.