

HOW TO READ ENGLISH LITERATURE

Whether you are thrilled about taking a full load of literature classes or you are only taking British Literature as a general education requirement, you will find certain strategies will vastly enhance your reading experience. This resource is designed to help you engage with literature in a fruitful way.

Before reading this resource, we recommend reading our [Strategies for the Reading Process and How to Read Narratives pdfs](#). Each of these inform how you read English Literature.

STAGES OF READING LITERATURE

1. **Recognize the Context** – Before you read, investigate the author’s background and the cultural features of that era. Find out what influenced the literature of that time, whether it be popular writing styles, political events, social movements, religion, or any other factors.
2. **Digest the Plot** – As you read, keep in mind the classic elements of story: status quo, inciting incident, rising action, climax, falling action, dénouement.
 - a. Does this piece of literature follow that same arc, or does it stray from the narrative plotline? How so?
 - b. Outline for yourself the trajectory of the main character’s pursuits.
 - c. Try reading sections aloud - pretend you are an actor or actress and have fun with the dramatization of the lines as if they were a script. This can be a useful tool if you find yourself losing focus or if you do not understand the content.
3. **Identify the Purpose** – After you read a section or finish the piece, take a few moments to ponder the message.
 - a. What was the author trying to say, and why does this piece of literature matter?
 - b. How did the literature speak to its readers during its own time, and how does it reach you in the present day?

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF

Ask yourself questions before, during, and after you read to engage with the text more fully. Do not allow yourself to respond “I don’t know.” Instead, think it through, give your best guess, and hunt down the answer in the text or through a little outside research.

1. Before Reading:

- a. What genre is it (e.g., poetry, prose, romantic narrative, tragedy, comedy, etc.)?
- b. When and where was the piece written? What were the defining elements of the culture at that time and place (religion, economy, and philosophy)?
- c. Who or what were the main influences in the author's life? What did they use to formulate a worldview?

2. While Reading:

- a. Who narrates the piece? Is the main character's voice narrating the action or another voice?
 - i. Is the narrator reliable - do they give an accurate portrayal of what is truly happening and why, or do they have some bias?
 - ii. Is the narrator all-knowing, unbound by space and time, or do they seem to be part of the action? Do they uncover the plot with you, the reader, or do they already know the outcome?
- b. Who is the main character (the protagonist)?
 - i. What are they like? Do you like them?
 - ii. Who or what influences their decisions?
- c. What is the protagonist's object of pursuit, that is, who or what do they most desire?
- d. What obstacles or people arise in their path, blocking their object of pursuit?
- e. Does the protagonist overcome the obstacles? If so, how? If not, why?
- f. Is the ending satisfying, or does it leave more to be desired? How so?

3. After Reading:

- a. How does the literature portray the human experience? What is it like to be a person in this world, according to the author?
- b. How does the literature portray the spiritual? What connection do humans have with God, fate, light, or darkness in this piece of literature?
- c. What is this piece saying about truth, goodness, and beauty? How does the piece define each of those three concepts?
- d. What does the author seem to believe about social relationships, such as the individual and the community, men and women, rich and poor, or government and private

enterprise? Does this piece of literature align with popular belief on these issues during that era, or does the author stand against popular thought?

- e. Does the author's worldview match a Biblical worldview, in your opinion? How is it similar or different?
- f. What are the main themes (underlying truths or main ideas) of this piece of writing? Look to the protagonist's decisions and motives to find the themes.
- g. What symbols does the author use to show the themes? Look at objects that reappear throughout the literature and seem to have an underlying value to the characters.
- h. What is the moral of the story? Consider the themes you just uncovered. How does the author suggest readers ought to apply those truths to their lives?
- i. What do you appreciate or dislike about this piece of literature? Why?

PRACTICE NOW