

# Understanding Fiction

**Fiction** is literature in the form of stories about imaginary people, places, and events. In order to understand fiction, you need to pay attention to the elements that go into making a story, including plot, characterization, setting, point of view, tone, and theme.

## Building Blocks of Fiction

Plot, character, and setting are the most basic building blocks of fiction. Read this excerpt from Mark Twain's *The Prince and the Pauper*. As you read, picture the scene in your mind based on the details the author gives you about the people, places, and events in the passage.

In the ancient city of London . . . a boy was born to a poor family of the name of Canty, who did not want him. On the same day another English child was born to a rich family of the name of Tudor, who did want him. All England wanted him too. England had so longed for him, and hoped for him, and prayed God for him, that, now that he was really come, the people went nearly mad for joy. Mere acquaintances hugged and kissed each other and cried. Everybody took a holiday, and high and low, rich and poor, feasted and danced and sang, and got very mellow; and they kept this up for days and nights together. By day, London was a sight to see, with gay banners waving from every balcony and housetop, and splendid pageants marching along. By night, it was again a sight to see, with its great bonfires at every corner, and its troops of revellers making merry around them. There was no talk in all England but of the new baby, Edward Tudor, Prince of Wales, who lay . . . in silks and satins, unconscious of all this fuss, and not knowing that great lords and ladies were tending him and watching over him—and not caring, either. But there was no talk about the other baby, Tom Canty, . . . in his poor rags, except among the family of paupers whom he had just come to trouble with his presence.

**Plot** is the events in a story and the order in which they take place. Plot usually includes conflicts, or challenges characters must face. In this passage, the birth of two babies, one rich and one poor, one wanted, the other unwanted, forms the basis of the plot. What will happen to Tom, born into poverty? What about Edward? Will he have a happy life? The plot will tell.

**Characterization** is what we learn about characters through the author's description of them. There are two important characters in this passage, Tom Canty and Edward Tudor, and we learn a lot about them in a short period of time, including their family backgrounds, social status, and how others feel about them.

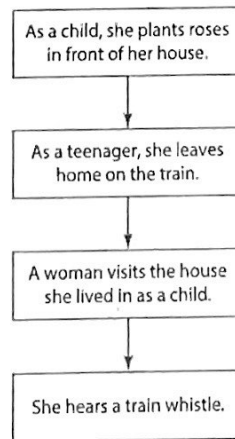
<b>Tom Canty</b>	<b>Edward Tudor</b>
Born to a poor family	Born to a wealthy family
Dressed in rags	Dressed in silk and satin
Unwanted by anyone	Wanted by his family and all of England
No one talks about him but his family	Everyone talks about him

We also learn about the **setting** of the story, England, which is where the story takes place. The story also includes a smaller setting within the larger one: the celebration in the streets of Edward's birth.

## Plot

**Plot** is the sequence of events that build upon each other to form a story. The author may not always spell out the plot for you. You may sometimes need to infer the steps in a plot in order to understand what happens by paying attention to clues in the text.

A plot usually works this way:



Steps in a Plot	Examples
<b>Beginning:</b> Main characters and setting are introduced.	A girl lives in a small town with her parents. She wants to go to school to become an artist.
<b>Conflict:</b> There is a problem the characters in a story try to overcome. It may come from circumstances outside the character (war, family conflict) or within the character (self-doubt or other personal struggles).	The girl's parents do not approve of her career choice because it is impractical, and they forbid her from painting or doing other artwork.
<b>Climax:</b> This is the story's most dramatic moment. The problem or conflict reaches the breaking point and is resolved in some way. Often characters undergo a change.	The girl secretly enters a drawing in an art contest without her parents' knowledge. When she wins first place, they realize she is talented and change their minds about her.
<b>Conclusion:</b> This is how the story ends.	The girl reconciles with her parents. She goes to art school.

Plots may take place in chronological order, with the events following each other as they would in real time, such as the birth of Tom and Edward in *The Prince and the Pauper*. Sometimes writers include flashbacks, in which a character remembers something that happened at an earlier point in his or her life. If you put the events of a story in order, remember to place flashbacks where they belong, earlier in the story. For example, suppose a story describes events in this order:

- A woman visits the house she lived in as a child.
- She bends to smell a rose in her old yard.
- Flashback: as a child she planted these roses in front of the house.
- She hears a train whistle.
- Flashback: As a teenager, she leaves home on the train.

What is the chronological order in which these events took place? The first event would be “as a child, she plants roses in front of the house” because it is the earliest event that takes place in real time. The second event would be “as a teenager, she leaves home on the train.”

## EXERCISE 1

## Plot

**Directions:** Read the story and then answer the questions that follow.

King Midas loved the land he ruled. He loved his subjects, and he loved his only daughter Marigold, but he spent most of his time in his treasure room, because there he found what he loved most.

This room was filled with gold from floor to ceiling. He spent hours stacking and counting his gold coins. In the end, he was always dissatisfied. No matter how much gold he had, he always wanted more.

One day, an old man had been traveling a long way. He was so hot and exhausted, he fell asleep in the palace gardens without realizing he was trespassing.

King Midas's servants angrily woke him and took him to King Midas for punishment. To their surprise, King Midas was kind to the old man, invited him to dinner, and let him rest in the palace for the night.

Soon after, Midas was visited by the god Dionysius. The old man was Dionysius's favorite servant, and the god wanted to reward Midas for his kind treatment of him. "Midas, I grant you one wish! Name it, and it is yours."

Midas knew immediately what he wanted. "I want everything I touch to turn to gold!" he exclaimed. Dionysius granted his wish.

Midas ran around his palace touching chairs, tables, the curtains, the walls, the floor. They all turned to precious gold.

The king's daughter ran in to see her father, as she did every morning. As always, her father was delighted to see her. Without thinking, Midas reached down and embraced Marigold. He stood back and cried out in horror.

It was too late. His touch had turned his beloved daughter into a heavy statue of pure gold.

King Midas broke down and wept. He realized that it was his daughter he had loved more than anything in the world.

1. Which statement BEST states the theme of this story?
  - A. Power corrupts everyone.
  - B. Destiny is beyond our control.
  - C. Greed leads to tragedy.
  - D. Love is a dangerous thing.

2. What is the conflict in this story?
  - A. The king is greedy.
  - B. The king neglects his daughter.
  - C. The king is a poor leader.
  - D. The king wants to go to war.
  
3. What happens at the story's climax?
  - A. The king is kind to the old man.
  - B. The king visits his treasure house.
  - C. The king turns his daughter to gold.
  - D. The king's wish is granted by Dionysius.
  
4. What happens at the story's conclusion?
  - A. The king realizes he loved his daughter more than gold.
  - B. The king realizes he has been tricked by Dionysius.
  - C. The king realizes that his people no longer love him.
  - D. The king realizes he can never have enough treasure.

*Answers are on page 793.*

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## Characterization

**Characterization** includes all the details that tell you who a character is, including descriptions of a character's physical appearance, thoughts and feelings, words, and actions. Other characters' responses to that character may also reveal important information about him or her.

Read this passage, and see what you can infer about Miss Minchin, the head of a girl's school, when she meets Sara, her latest pupil, and Sara's father, Captain Crewe:

It was just then that Miss Minchin entered the room. She was very like her house, Sara felt: tall and dull, and respectable and ugly. She had large, cold, fishy eyes, and a large, cold, fishy smile. It spread itself into a very large smile when she saw Sara and Captain Crewe. She had heard a great many desirable things of the young soldier from the lady who had recommended her school to him. Among other things, she had heard that he was a rich father who was willing to spend a great deal of money on his little daughter.

Details	Evidence
Physical appearance	"like her house . . . tall and dull, respectable and ugly"; "large, cold, fishy eyes, and a large, cold, fishy smile"
Thoughts and feelings	You can infer that she is fond of making money.
Words	none
Actions	smiles at Sara and her father because he is wealthy and wants to spend money on his daughter
Other people's reactions	Sara dislikes her.

In a single paragraph, we have learned that Miss Minchin is greedy and sees Sara and her father not as human beings but as a business opportunity. We have also learned that Sara is a smart little girl who can spot an untrustworthy adult quickly.

Characterization also helps us predict what may happen to characters in the story. We can predict that Sara and Miss Minchin will not get along on the basis of their characterizations.

## EXERCISE 2

### Characterization

**Directions:** Read the following passage and answer the questions below. Look for clues that describe Randolph Trent's situation and emotions.

Randolph Trent stepped from the Stockton boat on the San Francisco wharf, penniless, friendless, and unknown. Hunger might have been added to his trials, for, having paid his last coin in passage money, he had been a day and a half without food. Yet he knew it only by an occasional lapse into weakness as much mental as physical. Nevertheless, he was first on the gangplank to land, and hurried feverishly ashore, in that vague desire for action and change of scene. . . . Yet after mixing for a few moments with the departing passengers, each selfishly hurrying to . . . rest or business, he insensibly drew apart from them, with the instinct of a vagabond<sup>1</sup> and outcast. Although he was conscious that he was neither, but merely an unsuccessful miner suddenly reduced to the point of soliciting work or alms<sup>2</sup> of any kind, he took advantage of the first crossing to plunge into a side street, with a vague sense of hiding his shame.

<sup>1</sup>*vagabond*: a person who wanders from place to place.

<sup>2</sup>*alms*: food or money donated to the poor.

1. Match the characterizations of Randolph Trent to the phrases from the text. Write the letter of the phrases in the blank.

Hungry _____	a. "unsuccessful miner suddenly reduced to the point of soliciting work"
Alone _____	b. "penniless"; "paid his last coin in passage money"
Poor _____	c. "friendless and unknown"; "vagabond and outcast"
Unemployed _____	d. "day and a half without food"

2. Why does Randolph Trent cross at the nearest street to get away from the other people on the wharf?
- He is going to look for a place to eat.
  - He is ashamed that he has no money.
  - He is looking for a place to stay.
  - He is irritated by the people around him.
3. Based on Randolph Trent's situation in this passage, what do you predict will happen next?
- He will return to the ship and sail away from San Francisco.
  - He will run into an acquaintance, who will take him home and feed him.
  - He will collapse from hunger and exhaustion.
  - He will have to beg for work or food.

**Answers are on page 793.**

## Setting and Tone

The **setting** is the time and place where a story happens. For example, the setting of *The Prince and the Pauper* is in London several centuries ago. A story's setting may take place anywhere, real or imagined. It could be present-day New York City, ancient Egypt, an imaginary planet in the future, a kitchen, a palace, or a zoo. What is important to know is that setting often provides valuable clues about the theme, plot, and characters because it sets the story's mood and tone.

**Tone** is the writer's attitude toward a subject, which you can infer from the words the writer uses to describe it. This can range from joyful to amused to serious to outraged.

**Mood** is the feeling the writer wants to inspire in the reader. Consider this description of a house:

The house sat alone on the edge of a cliff. The gardens that once bloomed around it had become twisted with weeds, and mice ran

through its empty rooms. As the wind howled around the house, it sounded as it was a crying child who would not be comforted. No one had lived there for years, or so we thought.

The author's tone is dark and sinister, and the physical details of this setting build upon each other to create a scary, suspenseful mood for the reader: the house is perched alone on a cliff, the gardens are overgrown, the rooms are overtaken by mice, and the wind howls sadly. The last line suggests that someone or something might still be living there, which makes the house even more disturbing.

### EXERCISE 3

## Setting and Tone

**Directions:** Read the two passages below and answer the questions that follow. The first passage describes a countryside in summer. The second passage describes a foggy landscape.

### Passage 1

He said the pleasantest manner of spending a hot July day was lying from morning till evening on a bank of heath<sup>1</sup> in the middle of the moors, with the bees humming dreamily about among the bloom, and the larks singing high up overhead, and the blue sky and bright sun shining steadily and cloudlessly. That was his most perfect idea of heaven's happiness.

from *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë

### Passage 2

There was a steaming mist in all the hollows, and it had roamed in its forlornness up the hill, like an evil spirit, seeking rest and finding none. A clammy and intensely cold mist, it made its slow way through the air in ripples that visibly followed and overspread one another, as the waves of an unwholesome sea might do.

excerpt from *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens

#### 1. Which word BEST describes the mood of passage 1?

- A. Lazy
- B. Peaceful
- C. Suspenseful
- D. Hopeful

<sup>1</sup>heath: an open field of wild, uncultivated land



2. List three words or phrases that establish the mood of passage 1.

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3. Which word BEST describes the mood of passage 2?

- A. Exciting
- B. Complex
- C. Eerie
- D. Tragic

4. List three words or phrases that establish the mood of passage 2.

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*Answers are on page 793.*

## Author's Point of View

**Point of view** is the perspective an author chooses to tell the story. Most authors choose to tell the story in the **first person**, the **third-person limited**, or the **third-person all-knowing**.

Point of View	How You Can Tell	Examples
First person	Told from the point of view of the main character and uses pronoun <i>I</i> . Main character speaks directly to reader.	My heart was beating so hard, I thought everyone could hear it as I stepped onstage to dance at last.
Third-person limited	Narrator tells the story from the main character's point of view, using the pronouns <i>he</i> or <i>she</i> .	Alice thought she knew the way, but then she realized that the houses looked unfamiliar. She was lost, but she knew she would make it home somehow.
Third-person omniscient (all-knowing)	Writer moves from one person's point of view to another's, or writes from outside any character's point of view.	Jackson said nothing, but he felt sad that Isabelle was leaving. Isabelle did not know how to tell Jackson that she loved him. Each was a mystery to the other.

## EXERCISE 4

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## Author's Point of View

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**Directions:** Read each of the following passages and identify the point of view from which it is told by writing *first person*, *third-person limited*, or *third-person omniscient* on the blank.

1. Mrs. Rafferty opened the door. Standing on her freshly painted front porch was a rumpled, ragged looking, very thin young man. He was holding a rope attached to the scrawny neck of a dirty, old dog.  

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2. I heard a bark outside, and I opened the door to see where it came from. There was a young man, dirty and starved looking, standing on my porch. He held a rope with a dirty, old dog attached to it. The young man looked terrified. I had never seen such desperation.  

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3. The dog hesitated before following her master onto the porch, as if she knew that something dramatic was about to happen. The woman was startled, but she tried to remain calm. The young man was so nervous as he looked at her, he could barely speak.  

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*Answers are on page 793.*

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## Theme

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You learned about unstated main ideas in an earlier chapter. A theme is similar to an unstated main idea. A **theme** is the work's underlying message, what the author wants to express to you about life or some part of human nature. Here are some examples of themes:

- Good always triumphs over evil.
- Nature can be a harsh teacher.
- Together we can do more than we can do alone.
- Love conquers all.

To identify themes, you must do what you do to find unstated main ideas. You must use context clues and draw conclusions based on the language and details of the writing. Plot, characterization, and setting all contribute to the theme.

Read this passage, keeping character, plot, setting, and tone in mind.

Wing Biddlebaum, forever frightened and beset by a ghostly band of doubts, did not think of himself as in any way a part of the life of the town where he had lived for twenty years. Among all the people of Winesburg but one had come close to him. With George Willard . . . he had formed something like a friendship. George Willard was the reporter on the *Winesburg Eagle* and sometimes in the evenings he walked out along the highway to Wing Biddlebaum's house. Now as the old man walked up and down on the veranda, his hands moving nervously about, he was hoping that George Willard would come and spend the evening with him. . . . He went across the field through the tall mustard weeds and climbing a rail fence peered anxiously along the road to the town. For a moment he stood . . . , rubbing his hands together and looking up and down the road, and then, fear overcoming him, ran back to walk again upon the porch on his own house.

from *Winesburg, Ohio* by Sherwood Anderson

First, break the passage into smaller parts. Keep your answers brief and to the point. Look for specific evidence from the text to help support your interpretation.

#### **Plot**

*What happens in this passage?*

Wing goes to see if George is coming down the road to visit him, but he does not see him and goes back to his house.

*What conflict does this character face?*

Wing does not get along with the other townspeople. Wing is nervous that George might not show up: he rubs his hands together and paces back and forth.

*Does Wing change in any way?*

No.

#### **Character**

*Who is this passage mainly about?*

Wing Biddlebaum and his only friend, George Willard

*How would you describe Wing?*

Isolated, lonely, vulnerable, and nervous

*Based on what evidence?*

Wing's body language, the author's comments about George as his only friend, and the negative reaction of the townspeople to Wing

#### **Setting**

Wing's house near the highway, an overgrown field, and the highway that George is supposed to walk down

**Tone**

*What is the author's attitude toward Wing?*

Sympathetic—the author shows how vulnerable Wing is, but he does not make fun of him.

What message about human nature does this passage convey? Look at the answers to your questions. What is the common thread? Nearly all of the answers suggest isolation and the need for friendship. The theme of the passage might be that friendship can be a powerful force against loneliness.

**EXERCISE 5****Theme**

**Directions:** Read the passage below and then answer the questions that follow. The passage is about a man who is lost in the wilderness and has run out of food.

In the late afternoon he came upon scattered bones where the wolves had made a kill. The debris had been a caribou<sup>1</sup> calf an hour before, squawking and running and very much alive. He contemplated the bones, clean-picked and polished, pink with the cell-life in them which had not yet died. Could it possibly be that he might be that [before] the day was done! Such was life, eh? A vain and fleeting thing. It was only life that pained. There was no hurt in death. To die was to sleep. It meant cessation, rest. Then why was he not content to die?

But he did not moralize long. He was squatting in the moss, a bone in his mouth, sucking at the shreds of life that still dyed it faintly pink. The sweet meaty taste, thin and elusive almost as a memory, maddened him. He closed his jaws on the bones and crunched.

from *The Call of the Wild* by Jack London

1. What word BEST describes the tone of this scene?
  - A. Exciting
  - B. Sympathetic
  - C. Grim
  - D. Sarcastic

<sup>1</sup>*caribou*: a North American reindeer

2. What is the conflict in this passage?
  - A. Man versus man
  - B. Man versus nature
  - C. Man versus society
  - D. Man versus himself
  
3. Which of these words BEST describes the character of the man in the passage?
  - A. Frightened
  - B. Thoughtful
  - C. Optimistic
  - D. Gleeful
  
4. Based on the first paragraph, what does the man think about life?
  - A. We realize too late that life goes quickly.
  - B. Life is painful and death brings peace.
  - C. People fail to respect life in the wild.
  - D. The purpose of life is to survive at all costs.
  
5. What is a theme of the second paragraph?
  - A. Nature defeats humans every time.
  - B. There is peace to be found in death.
  - C. Humans are superior to animals.
  - D. The survival instinct is powerful.

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*Answers are on page 793.*