VOCABULARY REVIEW

To help you understand the elements of the short story, review the important terms defined below:

**Characterization:** The methods a writer uses to communicate information about characters to readers. When the author tells the reader directly about a character, it is called direct characterization. When the author shows the character in action and lets readers draw their own conclusions, it is called indirect characterization.

**Climax** The moment when the action comes to its highest point of dramatic conflict. Most often, the climax occurs before the actual ending of the story.

**Complication:** Any obstacle that increases the tension of the story conflict.

**Conflict:** The central source of tension and drama in the story. Conflict is sometimes referred to as the story problem.

**Description:** Verbal representation of characters, scene, or action, used to make the story more vivid for the reader.

**Dialogue:** The actual words that characters speak. Authors use dialogue skillfully in the short story to portray character and to dramatize conflict.

**Diction:** The author’s choice of words, the vocabulary level of the story.

**Dramatic irony:** A technique that increases suspense by letting readers know more about the dramatic situation than the characters know.

**Exposition:** Background material about the characters, setting, and dramatic situation with which the author introduces the essentials of the story to the reader.

**Falling action:** The part of the story, following the climax and leading to the resolution, in which there is a sharp decline in dramatic tension.

**Foreshadowing:** A writing technique that gives readers clues about events that will happen later in the story.

**Hyperbole:** An exaggerated statement used to make a strong effect.
Imagery: The use of selected details to describe one thing in terms of another. This helps suggest additional meanings and feelings.

Ironic: A particular tone created when the speaker intends a meaning that is opposite to the words he or she says.

Mood: The overall feeling—light and happy or dark and brooding, for example—created by an author’s choice of words.

Narrator: The speaker who tells the story. If the narrator is also a character who participates in the story, it is important not to confuse the narrator with the author—who may, in fact, hold a very different attitude toward the story.

Point of View: The perspective from which a story is told. Point of view is said to be omniscient if the author is outside the story and presents the thoughts of all the characters involved. Point of view is called limited when the story is told from the viewpoint of one character that can see only a part of the whole story.

Protagonist: The central character of the story.

Resolution: The conclusion of the story. The resolution includes the story’s action after the climax until the end of the story.

Rising Action: The part of the story, including exposition, in which the tension rises. Rising action builds to its highest point of tension at the story’s climax.

Setting: The environment in which the story takes place.

Structure: The framework that determines how a story is put together—its “skeleton.” The structure of many stories includes four basic parts: exposition, complication, climax, and resolution.

Style: The characteristic ways that an individual author uses language—including word choice, length and complexity of sentences, patterns of sound, and use of imagery and symbols.

Suspense: Techniques used by the author to keep readers interested in the story and wondering what will happen next.

Symbol: An image, object, character, or action that stands for an idea (or ideas) beyond its literal meaning.
Theme: The story’s main ideas-the “message” that the author intends to communicate by telling the story. Themes are often universal truths that are suggested by the specifics of the story.

Tone: The clues in a story that suggest the writer’s (or narrator’s) own attitude toward elements of his or her story.

Understatement: A figure of speech in which the speaker says less than what he or she actually feels.

Verbal irony: The use of figures of speech such as hyperbole and understatement to create an ironic effect.

Character is perhaps the most important of all the elements of the short story. Almost invariably, it is the people in stories that interest us most.

UNDERSTANDING CHARACTERS

Characters are defined by the qualities that make them think, feel, and act in certain ways. To understand each character completely, try looking at him or her from different angles:

Values What people, places, or things are most important in the character’s life? What does he or she value most?
Feelings What emotions does the character feel most strongly? (Anger? Fear? Love? Hate?...)

Goals: What are the character’s greatest hopes? What is he or she working to accomplish?
Problems What other characters or circumstances are keeping the character from achieving his or her goals?

TECHNIQUES OF CHARACTERIZATION

Characterization involves the various methods used by authors to communicate their characters to the reader.

Direct characterization The author tells the reader information about characters directly:
Even though she was the youngest, Sarah was the smartest.

Indirect characterization The author shows the character in action and lets readers make their own interpretations:
At report card time, Sarah was the first student in the family to bring home straight A’s.
Authors’ characterization tools authors use many clues to communicate characters to their readers, including:

- The character’s name
- The character’s physical appearance
- How the character is dressed
- The character’s occupation
- The character’s habits and actions
- What other characters say about him or her

QUESTIONS TO ASK WHILE YOU ARE READING A SHORT STORY:

1. Have you looked at each character from different angles? Do you understand their values, feelings, goals, and problems?
2. How does the author make use of both direct and indirect characterization to portray character? What specific characterization clues are given?

Exploring Conflict and Story Structure

CONFLICT

All stories are built on conflict. It provides the central source of tension and drama that make stories interesting to read.

The story problem To figure out the main conflict in a story, try to state the central problem of the story in one sentence. (E.g., Jack London’s “To Build a Fire” is a story about a man’s desperate struggle to keep himself alive in the wilderness.)

Categories of conflict: Conflict in stories often falls into one of four major categories:

- Character vs. character involves conflicts between people—such as family conflict, trouble with a bully, difficulties in romance, etc.
- Character vs. society involves conflict between an individual and larger groups—such as the outsider in a strange culture, a poor character’s struggle to “make it” in the business world, etc.
- Character vs. nature involves conflict between an individual and the natural world—such as fighting a powerful hurricane, surviving after a plane crash in the desert, etc.
- Character vs. self involves characters’ psychological conflicts with themselves—such as overcoming a drug habit or alcoholism, grieving over the loss of a loved one, etc.
STORY STRUCTURE

Story structure determines how authors present the story conflict to their readers. Many traditional story structures include these four elements:

Exposition This introduces background material about the characters, setting, and dramatic situation-such as when a character writes a letter home to tell his family (and the reader!) everything that has happened in the past month.

Complication The author presents obstacles that increase the tension of the story conflict-such as when the heroine’s long, lost, first true love shows up unexpectedly on the day she is to be married to another man.

Climax The moment when the action comes to its highest point of dramatic conflict-such as when the “good guy” and the “bad guy” in a Western finally come to a showdown in the town square.

Resolution This tells how the story concludes following the climax-such as in a science-fiction story that tells what happens after the space invaders have returned to their own planet.

QUESTIONS TO ASK WHILE YOU ARE READING A SHORT STORY:
1. Can you state the central problem of the story? Does the story conflict fit one of the four traditional story conflict categories?
2. In the story structure, can you locate the exposition? complication? climax? resolution?

The setting of a story serves different functions in the action and the emotional effect it has on the reader. In some stories the setting might almost be considered a “character” itself.

HOW SETTING FUNCTIONS IN A SHORT STORY

Setting works in many important ways in the short story:

Provides a backdrop for the action First, setting provides a physical background for the action of the story-such as on an ocean liner at sea, in a remote jungle, or on a farm in New England.

Establishes atmosphere Setting often sets a mood for the story-such as the romantic mood created by a full moon, the alienation of a busy city, or the exotic-ness of a foreign land.

Shapes character and action Setting can also provide a background environment that shapes the attitudes and actions of characters in the story-such as the country boy seeing the “big city” for the first time, or the rich character who suddenly finds himself lost in a tough neighborhood.

Reflects character psychology In some cases, the setting even symbolically reflects the inner feelings of the characters or the working of the story conflict-such as the thunderstorm that parallels a character’s inner turmoil, or the summer heat wave that accompanies the rising tensions of the story.
HOW DO AUTHORS CREATE SETTING?

Two powerful techniques that authors use to create settings are the use of details and sense images.

**Details** By building their description of settings with realistic details, authors make their story seem more believable—such as using actual street names when setting a story in a real city, or choosing authentic details to depict a setting set in a foreign country.

**Sense images** By describing settings in images that appeal to the reader’s senses, the author creates a vivid atmosphere that readers can associate with settings in their own experience—such as the smell of bread baking in a farmhouse kitchen, the feel of swimming in cool lake water, or the sound of rain falling on a tin roof.

QUESTIONS TO ASK WHILE YOU ARE READING A SHORT STORY:

1. What physical backdrop does the setting provide for the story? Does it create atmosphere? shape characters’ actions? reflect inner psychology?
2. What techniques did the author use to create the setting? Does the author use details and images that speak to the reader’s senses?

Exploring Point of View

**Point of view** is the perspective from which a story is told. To determine a story’s point of view, ask yourself, “Who is telling the story?” Although there are many options available, short story writers usually stick to a single point of view within one story.

**TYPES OF POINT OF VIEW**

**Omniscient** The point of view is called “third person omniscient” if the author is outside the story and presents the thoughts of all the characters involved as an objective observer:

When Jane saw Bill jogging past her house, her heart skipped a beat. When Bill saw Jane in the hallway at school, he fought hard to catch his breath. No doubt about it—it was love!

**Limited** The point of view is “third person limited” if the author tells the story from the viewpoint of just one character:

When Jane saw Bill jogging past her house, her heart skipped a beat. She thought by the way Bill looked at her in the hallway that he liked her, too.
The point of view is “first person limited” if the character narrates his or her experience directly:
When I see Bill jogging past my house, I think I’m going to faint. I think I have the same effect on him. Do you think this means we’re in love?

THE NARRATOR AGAINST THE AUTHOR

If a narrator is telling the story, readers must be careful not to confuse the narrator’s attitude with the author’s. Often authors create a character to act as narrator who expresses far different attitudes than those they hold themselves.

The “unreliable” narrator sometimes authors even create a narrator who gives the reader clues that he or she is not to be trusted as a reliable source of information. It then becomes the reader’s job to decide the “real truth” beneath the unreliable narrator’s lies or distortions.

QUESTIONS TO ASK WHILE YOU ARE READING A SHORT STORY:

1. Who is telling the story? What point of view has the author chosen?
2. Are there any clues that the narrator’s attitudes might be different from the author’s? Are there any clues that the narrator might even be an unreliable source of information?

A short story’s theme can be defined as what the story is about and the problems or issues that it explores.

WHAT IS A THEME?

When trying to discover the theme(s) of a story, remember that a theme is not a summary of the plot. A theme is a universal idea suggested by the specifics of the story. It is stated in general terms.

The true themes of a story hold true for the whole story—not just a part of it. They are the central ideas that state the essential meaning of the story.

Explicit vs. “hidden” themes It’s easy to state the theme of stories that have been written deliberately to communicate a specific lesson or moral (for example, Aesop’s fable of the Tortoise and the Hare, which ends with the explicit moral: “Slow and steady wins the race”).

Most stories, however, are not as easily reduced to a single simple lesson. They are likely to have more than one important theme imbedded in the story itself.
**Some traditional short story themes**  Although a story’s themes are specifically linked to the story that explores them, authors draw on common theme patterns that have appeared in stories throughout the history of literature. Have you encountered any of these traditional themes in your reading?

- The struggle between good and evil
- The differences between nature and civilized society
- The conflict between the individual and the community
- The differences between country and city life
- The conflict between human free will and fate

**RECOGNIZING THEMES IN A SHORT STORY**

A story communicates its central theme or themes in a variety of ways. In looking for themes, consider some of these possible clues:
- The title of the story
- Important images or symbols in the story
- General observations made by the author, narrator, or characters in the story
- Any “moral” suggested by the outcome of the conflict

**QUESTIONS TO ASK WHILE YOU ARE READING A SHORT STORY:**

1. Can you state the major themes of the story? Do they relate to any traditional themes that you have encountered in other reading?

2. What clues has the author used to communicate these themes?
Imagery and symbols are a special kind of language. Authors use imagery and symbols to say more than literal statements can. Both make use of the difference between what a word literally means—its “denotation”—and the extra ideas associated with it—its “connotation.”

**IMAGERY**

Imagery is the use of selected details to describe one thing in terms of another thing. This comparison helps evoke additional meanings or feelings: “He ran like the wind” or “She was more beautiful than any angel.”

**How imagery works in a story** Individual images create vivid pictures in the reader’s mind that link the person, place, or object described with the special qualities of the image. Images can be used in flattering and unflattering ways.

Strings of related images can work together to create a mood or set a tone for the whole story.

**SYMBOLS**

A symbol is any image, object, character, or action that stands for an idea (or ideas) beyond its literal meaning. Writers use symbols to suggest larger meanings radiating from the specifics of their story.

**Conventional and nonconventional symbols** Many symbols are universally recognized—for example, the American flag, which is commonly recognized as a symbol for the United States.

Other symbols are not so universally defined. They do not acquire meaning until it is defined by how they are used in the context of a story. They may even suggest more than one meaning, suggesting a variety of possible associations. An example is the symbol of “snow,” which might be used to symbolize goodness because of its whiteness, or cruelty because of its coldness.

**How to recognize symbols in short stories** You can often look for symbols in some of these parts of a story:

- Story titles; also character and place names
- Nature images: snow, thunderstorms, etc.
- Allusions to classical and other literary and historical references
- Images or figures that appear at important points in the story
- Images that seem to receive special emphasis or are often repeated
QUESTIONS TO ASK WHILE YOU ARE READING A SHORT STORY:

1. What imagery does the author use to describe character and setting? What are the effects of these images?
2. What symbols do you recognize in the story? What clues let you recognize these symbols?

TONE

The tone of a story is like the author’s “tone of voice”—it expresses the writers’ own attitude toward his or her characters, setting, conflict, and other elements of the story.

Varieties of tone: An author’s tone can be as varied as “tone of voice” can sound in real life. It can be silly or thoughtful, chatty or formal, comic or tragic.

Sometimes tone is more complex, expressing a mixture of attitudes that may even seem to contradict themselves; for instance, the tone could be humorous, but with an undercurrent of sadness; serious, but with overtones of playfulness.

The effect of tone on the reader The author’s tone has a direct impact on how the reader responds to the story. Different tones can cause readers to experience such varying emotions as pity, fear, horror, or humor.

If the author’s tone is distant, for example, readers are less likely to feel as close to the characters than if the tone was more sympathetic.

IRONY

Irony is a particular kind of tone.

Verbal irony Speakers use verbal irony when the meaning they wish to communicate is different from, or actually opposite to, what their actual words seem to say. Hyperbole is an exaggerated statement used to make a strong effect; an example would be “I’ll never get this fishing line untangled in a million years.”

Understatement, the opposite of hyperbole, involves saying less than you really feel for ironic effect—such as saying, after almost having been hit by a bus, “Well, now that that little excitement is over, how about some tea?”

Uses of irony Sometimes by expressing an idea indirectly, speakers can say more than if they communicate their feelings more directly.

By communicating opposite ideas at the same time, authors use irony for
humorous or serious effects. They do this by contrasting the way characters feel about a situation with how a more objective observer might view it.

QUESTIONS TO ASK WHILE YOU ARE READING A SHORT STORY:

1. Is there a prevailing tone used in the story? What is the emotional effect of the tone on the reader?
2. Where does the author make use of irony? For what purposes?

Style can be defined as any of the characteristic ways that an author uses language.

WHAT IS STYLE?

Every author uses the elements of style in individual ways to achieve certain effects. Like an individual fingerprint, an author’s style identifies his or her writing as unique. It also has specific effects on the reader.

RECOGNIZING THE ELEMENTS OF STYLE

Many different elements go into what makes up an author’s “style”:

Word choice (also called “diction”): Does the author use words drawn from everyday language and slang, or from a higher vocabulary level?

Length and complexity of sentences: Are story sentences short and choppy, or long and complex?

Punctuation: Does the author use punctuation in any distinctive ways that differ from normal usage?

Use of imagery and symbols: Does the author make use of special images or symbols to tell the story?

Sound and rhythm: Does the author choose or arrange words for the way they sound? How does the story sound when you read it aloud?

The effects of style choices The elements of an author’s style have many effects on how readers respond to his or her story.
**Mood:** How do the elements listed above contribute to the story’s mood? For example, is the overall feeling of the story light and easy, or dark and brooding?

**Tone:** How do the elements listed above affect the author’s tone? Is the overall tone warm and inviting, or distant and reserved?

**QUESTIONS TO ASK WHILE YOU ARE READING A SHORT STORY:**

1. What elements of the author’s style are most noticeable? How does the story’s style compare with the style of stories by other authors you have read?
2. How do the elements of the story’s style specifically affect how you respond to the story?
Final Student Quiz

Directions: In the list of responses that follows each question below, circle each response that answers the question correctly. (Think carefully. Some questions may have more than one allowable answer.)

1. An author who uses indirect characterization to communicate characters to readers might make use of which of the following?
   a. showing how the character is dressed
   b. describing the character’s physical appearance
   c. explaining why the character is a bad person
   d. all of the above
   e. none of the above

2. Which of the following describes how setting functions in the short story?
   a. establishes atmosphere
   b. reflects character psychology provides a backdrop for the action
   c. provides a backdrop for the action
   d. all of the above
   e. none of the above

3. Which of the following could be an example from a story told from the “third person omniscient” point of view?
   a. “I’ve loved Maria since the very first day I met her!”
   b. “Gabriel knew he loved Maria from the very first day he met her.”
   c. “Gabriel loved Maria—and Maria loved Gabriel—from the very first day they met each other.”
   d. all of the above
   e. none of the above

4. Which of the following are often included in a traditional story’s structure?
   a. respiration
   b. expostulation
   c. fabrication
   d. all of the above
   e. none of the above
5. In which of the pairs of terms below could the first term be considered a “conventional” symbol for the second term?
   a. five intersecting rings: the Olympics
   b. maple leaf flag: Canada
   c. six-pointed star: Judaism
   d. all of the above
   e. none of the above

6. Which of the following might be commonly considered an element of an author’s style?
   a. the color of a character’s eyes
   b. the rhythm of the story’s sentences
   c. how the author uses punctuation
   d. all of the above
   e. none of the above

Answers for the above:
1. a and b
2. d
3. b and c
4. e
5. d
6. b and c
Directions: From the word list below, complete each of the following sentences with the word that completes it best.

WORD LIST

narrator    irony    characterization    climax    point of view
conflict    theme    foreshadowing    theme    exposition
complication    dramatic    irony    protagonist    exposition    falling action

1. The message that the author intends to communicate by telling the story is called the ________________________________
2. The part of the story in which there is a sharp decline in tension is called the _______________________________
3. When the reader knows more about what is happening in the story than the characters, this is called _____________
4. ________________ is created when the speaker really means the opposite of what his or her words literally say.
5. The strategies a writer uses to communicate information about characters to readers is called _____________
6. Another word for “story problem” is ___________
7. The ________________________________ is the moment when the action comes to its highest point of dramatic conflict.
8. ________________ introduces background material about characters, setting, and the present situation.
9. When the author gives clues to the reader about events that will happen later in the story, this is called ________________________________
10. The central character of the story is ________________________________
Answers for above:
1. theme
2. falling action
3. dramatic irony
4. irony
5. characterization
6. conflict
7. climax
8. exposition
9. foreshadowing
10. protagonist