Reading Fiction

Here are some questions you might ask when you are faced with the task of reading or writing about fiction. Your answers to these questions will help you begin brainstorming, to overcome the awful whiteness of the empty page.

1. **From what point of view is the story told?** Can you speculate on the appropriateness of that point of view? If a story is told from the point of view of a first-person narrator who participates in the action, what significant changes would occur if it were told from the point of view of an omniscient author? And, of course, vice versa. Keep in mind that first-person narrators do not know what other characters think. On the other hand, omniscient narrators know everything about the lives of the characters. How would the story you are writing about be changed if the viewpoint were changed?

2. **Who are the principal characters in the story?** (There will rarely be more than three in a short story; the other characters will often be portrayed sketchily; sometimes they are even stereotypes.) What functions do the minor characters serve? Do any of the characters change during the course of the story? How, and why?

3. **What is the plot of the story?** Do the events that constitute the plot emerge logically from the nature of the characters and circumstances, or are the plot elements coincidental and arbitrary?

4. **What is the setting of the story?** Does the setting play an important role in the story, or is it simply the place where things happen? What might the consequences of some other setting be for the effectiveness of the story?

5. **What is the tone of the story?** Read the first several paragraphs of the story to see how the tone is established. Does the tone change with events, or remain fixed? How does the tone contribute to the effect of the story?

6. **Do you find ambiguities in the story?** That is, can you interpret some element of the story in more than one way? Does that ambiguity result in confusion, or does it add to the complexity of the story?

7. **Does the story seem to support or attack your own political and moral positions?**

8. **When was the story written?** Bring your knowledge of history and contemporary events to bear on your reading of the story. Does the story clarify, enhance, or contradict your understanding of history?

9. **What is the theme of the story?** This, finally, is often the most significant question to answer. All the elements of fiction, tone, setting, plot, theme, characterization, and point of view have been marshaled to project a theme — the moral proposition the author wishes to advance. When you write about a work, resist the tendency to do the easiest thing — retell the plot, incident by incident. You must work instead to understand the devices the author uses to convey his or her theme, and, in your essay, reveal that understanding.

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