

How to Read a Short Story Before

Look at the story's title. What *might* this story be about?

Use and develop your background knowledge about this subject. If the title is “The Lesson,” (by Toni Cade Bambara) ask yourself what kind of lessons there are, what lessons you have learned, and so on.

Establish a purpose for reading this story. “Because my teacher told me to” is one obvious purpose, but not a very useful one. Try to come up with your own question, one based perhaps on the title or an idea your teacher recently discussed in class. How about, “Why do we always have to learn the hard way?” if the story is titled “The Lesson”? Of course, you should also be sure you know what your teacher expects you to do and learn from this story; this will help you determine what is important while you read the story.

Orient yourself. Flip through the story to see how long it is. Take a look at the opening sentences of different paragraphs, and skim through the opening paragraph; this will give you a sense of where the story is set, how difficult the language is, and how long you should need to read the story.

During

Identify the main characters. By “main” I mean those characters that make the story happen or to whom important things happen. Get to know what they are like by asking such questions as “What does this character want more than anything else—and *why*?”

Identify the plot or the situation. The plot is what happens: The sniper from one army tries to shoot the sniper from the other army (“The Sniper”). Some writers prefer to put their characters in a situation: a famous hunter is abandoned on an uncharted island where, it turns out, he will now be hunted (“The Most Dangerous Game”).

Pay attention to the setting. Setting refers not only to where the story takes place, but when it happens. It also includes details like tone and mood. What does the story sound like: a sad violin playing all by itself or a whole band charging down the road? Does the story have a lonely feeling—or a scary feeling, as if any minute something will happen?

Consider the story's point of view. Think about why the author chose to tell the story through this person's point of view instead of a different character; why in the past instead of the present; in the first instead of the third person.

Pay attention to the author's use of time. Some short story writers will make ten years pass by simply beginning the next paragraph, “Ten years later....” Look for any words that signal time passed. Sometimes writers will also use extra space between paragraphs to signal the passing of time.

Find the crucial moment. Every short story has some conflict, some tension or element of suspense in it. Eventually something has to give. This is the moment when the character or the story suddenly changes direction. A character, for example, feels or acts differently than before.

Remember why you are reading this story. Go back to the question you asked when you began reading this story. Double-check your teacher's assignment, too. These will help you to read more closely and better evaluate which details are important when you read. You might also find your original purpose is no longer a good one; what is the question you are now trying to answer as you read the story?

After

Read first to understand...then to analyze. When you finish the story, check to be sure you understand what happened. Ask: WHO did WHAT to WHOM? If you can answer these questions correctly, move on to the next level: WHY? Why, for example, did the character in the story lie?

Return to the title. Go back to the title and think about how it relates to the story now that you have read it. What does the title refer to? Does the title have more than one possible meaning?

Terms to Know

- character
- conflict
- conventions
- imagery
- metaphor
- mood
- motif
- plot
- repetition
- structure
- suspense
- symbol
- theme(s)
- tone