

## A General Approach to Reading Literature

Works of literature are concerned with interpreting ideas, experiences, and events. They employ facts, description, and detail to convey larger meanings. Use the following general guidelines to read a literary work more effectively.

**1. Read with an open mind.** Be ready to respond to the work; don't make up your mind about it before you start reading.

**2. Preview the work before reading it.** Read background information about the author and the work and study the title. For a short story, read the first few and last few paragraphs and quickly skim through the pages in between, noticing the setting, the names of characters, the amount of dialogue, and so forth. For a poem, read it through once to get an initial impression. For a novel, stop often in your reading and think about what you have read, and possibly make predictions about what you think may happen.

**3. Read Slowly and carefully.** Works of literature use language in unique and creative ways, requiring you to read them slowly and carefully with a pen in hand. Mark interesting uses of language, such as striking phrases or descriptions, as well as sections that hint at the theme of the work.

**4. Note that literature often “bends the rules” of grammar and usage.** Writers of literature may use sentence fragments, ungrammatical dialogue, or unusual punctuation to create a particular effect in a story or poem. When you see such instances in literature, remember that the writers bend the rules for a purpose.

**5. Establish the literal meaning first.** During the first reading of a work, try to establish its literal meaning. Who is doing what, when and where? Identify the general subject, specific topic, and main characters. What is happening? Describe the basic plot, action, or sequence of events. Establish where and during what time period the action occurs.

**6. Reread the work, or sections of the work, to focus on your interpretation.** To analyze a literary work, you will need to reread parts of the work or the entire work several times.

**7. Anticipate a gradual understanding.** Literary works are complex; you should not expect to understand a poem or short story immediately after reading it. As you reread and think about the work, its meanings will often come to mind gradually. Consider why the writer wrote the work and what message the writer is trying to communicate. Then ask, “So what?” to discover deeper meanings. Try to determine the work's view of, comment on, or lesson about the human experience.

**8. Interact with the work.** Jot down your reaction to it in the margins as you read. Include hunches, insights, and feelings as well as questions about the work. Highlight or underline key words, phrases, or action that seem important or that you want to reconsider later.

**9. Identify themes and patterns.** Study your annotations to discover how the ideas in the work link together to suggest a theme or themes.

(Adapted from Successful College Writing, McWhorter)