

# Analyzing a fictional text (A short story, a novel excerpt etc.) | EN LK

If you analyse a fictional text, you usually have to examine a **certain aspect**. Typical tasks are:

- "Analyse how the culture clash in the given excerpt is depicted."
- "Analyse how character X and his state of mind are presented. Focus on narrative techniques and language."
- "Analyse how the atmosphere/the city/ society... in the opening scene are presented. Focus on..."
- "Analyse how the event is presented through the different characters' reactions. Focus on point of view and dialogue."
- "Analyse how the rising conflict between the characters is presented. Focus on language and point of view."
- "Analyse how suspense is created. Consider stage directions, dialogue and voice-over."

Below you find some common areas of analysis that might be relevant for your task:

## 👁️ The narrator (narrative perspectives/points of view, reliability, narrative distance)

The narrator is the "voice" that tells the story. (**narrator ≠ author!**). There are basically two **points of view**:

- 👤 **First-person point of view**: only the thoughts & actions of the protagonist are revealed ("I...")
  - → the reader tends to identify with the protagonist; the reader gets direct access to thoughts and motivations
  - → however, the reader needs to be careful not to take all he/she reads for granted as he/she experiences the development through the main character's eyes.
- 👤 **Third-person point of view**:
  - **Third-person limited narrator**: tells the story from the outside, but only describes feelings & thoughts from the perspective of one particular character in a story. The narrator might provide explanations and interpretations of events and actions that the described character him-/herself doesn't or can't offer.
    - → the effects are similar to the ones of the first-person narrator. However, the 3<sup>rd</sup>-person perspective creates a greater distance between narrator and reader (→ see "narrative distance"). Example:

I wanted to hug her but somehow I didn't. (1 <sup>st</sup> ps. nar.)	He wanted to hug her but his pride kept him from this emotional act. (3 <sup>rd</sup> ps. nar.)
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  - **Third-person omniscient narrator**: full knowledge of all characters and situations
    - As the story is told by an omniscient narrator, the reader knows more than the character(s) in the story
    - → By showing the thoughts and feelings of multiple characters, the narrator provides a more nuanced/ balanced/ complex look at events; helps the reader to see the complexity of a situation/ family/ relationship and identify with several characters at once. However, "knowing it all" creates less tension.

### 👥 Changes of narrative perspectives:

- the narrative perspective **might change** within a novel (e.g. from one character to another) → e.g. to show an event from different viewpoints; to let the reader identify with several perspectives

It is not enough to just name the narrative perspective. You should also **explain where the narrative perspective becomes evident in the text** and **how the narrative perspective is relevant to the task**.

**Example:** If you have to analyse how the internal conflict of a character is portrayed, then a limited third-person narrator offering many insights into the protagonist's thought process helps to show the conflicting emotions of the character.

📖 **Reliability** of the narrator: How much can the reader trust what the narrator is saying? Is he/she biased? Deceiving? Keep in mind: A lying protagonist does not mean the narrator is unreliable. Rather, a narrator who hides information from the reader is unreliable and makes the reader re-interpret events later on. Only mention and analyze the reliability if it is relevant.

🗣️ **Narrative distance**: the distance between the narrator and the fictional world (character and events of the story)

- in intense and emotional scenes the narrative distance is often very **close** (e.g. interior monologue, stream of consciousness) → this engages readers' feelings and may foster understanding and empathy
- **great narrative distance**: the narrator often "**zooms out**" and just observes the events. This is often used to provide context (background information) or to create an emotional distance between reader & character, forcing the reader to think and "guess" the character's thoughts and feelings for him-/herself

### Narrative elements

- 🗣️ The narration can **vary** between **dialogues** (direct speech), **description** (e.g. of the setting) and **comments** (on events/ dialogues) → this is often done on purpose – e.g. a story with little or no dialogue often focusses on the inner world of a character; whereas a story with lots of dialogue might focus on character relationships or a conflict
- **Indirect speech** (e.g. *He asked himself what happened to...*) and **Free Indirect Speech** (e.g. *What happened to...?*) can affect the narrative distance. Free Indirect Speech creates a much closer narrative distance.
  - 🗣️ **stream of consciousness** – a special form of *Free Indirect Speech* which imitates what the character is thinking, feeling and reacting to as a continuous flow; often seems unstructured & chaotic

## 🏠 Modes of presentation








- 📺 **scenic mode of presentation**: scene/action is described in great detail (e.g. a lot of **dialogue** or **interior monologue**) → reader is a witness of the events and can almost "feel" the situation/atmosphere/ love...
- 🗣️ **panoramic mode of presentation**: The narrator tells the story as a condensed (*verdichtet*) series of events, summarizing in a few sentences what happened over a longer period of time (= telling, not showing).
- The mode of presentation **might change** within a novel or sometimes even within an excerpt





## Structural elements in novels

Stories are not always told in a clear chronological order. Instead, the events are often arranged in a purposeful way. Here are some narrative techniques often used in fictional texts:

-  **A frame story:** presents a story within a story (e.g. *Titanic*: an old lady tells the story of her life)
-  **A back story:** used to explain the history of characters, objects, places etc. in the story
-  **cliffhanger:** the narrative ends unresolved, prompting the reader to consider possible endings
-  **flashback:** narrative goes back in time (frequent flashbacks might show that a character "lives in the past")
-  **flash-forward:** future events are revealed
-  **foreshadowing** - When the writer gives a subtle hint/clue to something that will eventually happen later in the story; it may be explicit (obvious) or implied (disguised)
-  **In medias res:** The story starts in the middle of events (often used in short stories)



### Conflict in fictional texts

Conflicts often slowly rise and lead up to a clash/climax. Almost every story includes either one of these two kinds of conflict:

- **Outer conflict:** external forces (e.g. society, nature) or other characters cause a conflict with/for the protagonist
- **Inner conflict:** the protagonist is forced to make a difficult choice or is torn between two worlds



When you detect some of these plot elements or arrangements in a fictional text, **ask yourself questions** such as...

- Why is the story arranged in this way? Why not in another way?
- What is missing here – e.g. dialogue, reflection, description, a back story? Why is it missing?
- What might be the purpose/ effect of this flashback, foreshadowing, frame story, this dialogue...?



## Means to create tension – plot & language

- **Anticipation/foreshadowing:** Hints at the plot of the story, building up expectations that become true later; repetitions of certain sounds, symbols etc. to hint at sth. that might happen later
- **Unanswered questions:** They make the reader want to read on, to find the answers to the questions
- **Manner of speech:** anxiety, hidden worries, euphemistic language (e.g. "*Before I go*" = Before I die), words with negative connotations (e.g. *dark, ill, kill, predator, bat*) or double meaning
- **Imagery that evokes a certain response:** animals (e.g. sharks, wolves, bats); blood, prey, tear apart, rip...



### Tips



- If you have already introduced the text in no 1 (summary), then **introduce the task** (no 2) and the analytical categories. Use the passive ("...will be analysed with regards to...").



- Be willing to change your understanding and your analytical thesis by paying close attention to all parts of the text. A basic misunderstanding can mess up your whole analysis, so **do not make hasty conclusions**.



- Do not just try to find as many analytical aspects as possible, but explain the **effects** of these different elements. If, for example, a story is about a character being torn between two cultures, try to find words, stylistic devices, settings etc. that support this inner conflict (e.g. contrasts, certain symbols, limited point of view etc.)



- As much as possible, present your results in **clusters** and not in the chronological order as they appear in the text. To do that, you **may combine passages from different parts** of the text that are related.



- **Back up** all your claims and interpretations with **references** to or **quotations** from the text! Try to **integrate** your **quotes** into your text well, for example by only quoting selected words, paraphrasing etc.



- As always, each **paragraph** should make one clear point (that is part of your argument). Ideally, each argument starts with a topic sentence that introduces the main finding/ idea.



- End with a **conclusion** that does not merely sum up your findings, but also refers back to the task and states your results on a more general/abstract level.



- **Avoid long chunks of paraphrasing.** Assume the reader of your analysis already knows the gist of the story.



- **More help:** check GreenLine Oberstufe, pp. 256-257 (Dealing with narrative texts), p. 312 (useful phrases), p. 261 (characterization), p. 262 (Narrative perspectives), p. 263 (Narrative techniques)



## 👤 Characters/ Characterisation/ character constellations

- **Types of characters:** Protagonist, antagonist (often the *villain*), foil character (contrast to protagonist), round (complex, changes) or flat (no change, stereotypical) characters, tragic hero, minor characters etc.
- **Often in short stories: Representative everyday characters:** characters stand for sth (e.g. Western vs. traditional life)
- **Types of characterisation:**
  - **direct characterization ("tell"):** The narrator or a character tells the reader explicitly what a character is like
    - keep in mind that this **doesn't need to be true** – it's just the **perception** of how sb sees a character!
    - Direct characterizations by family and friends can seem/appear to be **controversial/ contradictory** or show/reveal different sides of X as each of them perceives X in his/her own way/in an individual way
    - a frequent use of direct characterization can create a clear/ convincing/ positive/ negative picture of.../
  - **indirect characterization ("show"):** The reader draws his own conclusions about a character through his/her behavior, looks, speech, thoughts, use of language and interactions with other characters
    - what a character observes and views to be important in a scene may reflect their state of mind/character (e.g. a careless man not aware of his messy house in contrast to a tidy woman noticing the chaos)
- **Aspects to consider:** name, position/role, social background, character's age, physical appearance/ body, language, thoughts, character traits, development, relationships, unusual behavior etc.
- **Character constellations** (e.g. within a family or company) and **interactions** might **reveal certain dynamics** (e.g. shallowness, unhappiness, hierarchy) about a society (e.g. dystopian, American, Nigerian) or group of people

### 📌 Phrases for indirect characterisation

- From the way he/she addresses .../reacts to .../behaves when... we can infer/ conclude that...
- X's behaviour/the way she speaks/ dresses/... implies/suggests that...
- X's reaction/comment/... reveals/makes the reader feel/believe/understand that...

## 💬 Language: Choice of words & syntax

The kind of language characters use can **reflect** their education, culture, intelligence, age or worldview as well as the society's condition the characters live in. For example, characters or the narrator might use...

- **colloquial speech** – e.g. words/phrases often used in the US like *like, awesome* → highlights Western thinking
- **non-English languages** – Are languages besides English included (e.g. Hindi, Igbo)? Why? → might underline that a character lives between two worlds or is rooted in his traditional culture
- **words with positive or negative connotations** that highlight a person's mindset or describe the → setting
- **simple vs. sophisticated** word choice, e.g. to show various degrees of education
- Pay attention to the **syntax/sentence variation**: e.g. short sentences signifying emotional outbursts

## ✂ Language: Stylistic devices

In fictional texts, stylistic devices are not used to convince anyone, but to either make the narrative more powerful, engaging or emotional or to present the narrator's attitude towards characters or the action. A short list:

- **symbols:** e.g. jeans or cigarettes symbolising Western lifestyle
- **imagery:** similes (*He was as cold as a stone.*), metaphors or personifications → purpose varies (e.g. expressing complex meanings, for emphasis, to compare, to illustrate, add emotional intensity, make a scene more sensual)
- **contrasts/antitheses:** such as *fire & ice; calm & loud etc.* → often used to highlight differences between characters
- **enumeration:** e.g. of a long list of insults by a character → highlights a character's anger
- **parallelism/ parallel sentence structures:** often used to compare or contrast different attitudes/ choices/...
- **climax:** highlights a development & rising tension/conflict
- **hyperbole** (exaggeration): e.g. a character often using hyperbolic speech might appear arrogant or deluded
- **irony, sarcasm or euphemisms:** often used as a distancing effect by a character (in his/her speech) or the narrator

## 🏠 Setting & atmosphere

Authors often use the **setting** either to **mirror the state of mind of characters** or they describe a **contrast** to highlight the characters' state of mind. Here are some guiding questions:

- **Where** does the story take place? Examples:
  - **Outdoors:** freedom and liberty of characters & their thoughts; **inside in a limited area:** isolation, oppression; **special places:** a public café (=part of society), in the privacy of their home, in the secrecy of a forest...;
- **When?**
  - **Which season?** Spring or summer (optimism, positive future prospects); autumn/winter: bleakness, pessimism
  - **What time of the day?** at night, in the morning, at dusk or dawn
  - **When is the story set?** During WW2, in times of peace, during a recession etc.
- What about the **weather** and the **lighting conditions**?
  - rain, cold, fog, storm, clouds, snow and ice: usually a negative atmosphere; sun: warmth, comfort
  - darkness or twilight: fear, discomfort, uneasiness, uncertainty; brightness: clarity, comfort, hope
- Use of **details:** Interior design (e.g. furniture) can also contribute to an atmosphere (e.g. broken chair)
- **Descriptive adjectives and adverbs** can also create atmosphere (e.g. "A rusty old wooden door" = decay)



Category	Elements
composition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• story vs discourse</li> <li>• levels of communication: real author/reader, fictive narrator/reader, characters</li> <li>• genre</li> </ul>
point of view	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1<sup>st</sup>/3<sup>rd</sup> person</li> <li>• omniscient/limited</li> <li>• reliable/unreliable</li> <li>• overt/covert narrator</li> <li>• multiperspectivity</li> </ul>
characters	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• protagonist/antagonist/foil</li> <li>• characterization: explicit/implicit, by narrator/another character, self/others</li> </ul>
plot	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• story vs plot</li> <li>• types: initiation, quest, courtship</li> <li>• beginning: ab ovo, in medias res</li> <li>• ending: closed, deus ex machina, open, happy, tragic</li> </ul>
setting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• time: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– order (chronological, anachronic: flashback, flash-forward)</li> <li>– duration (discourse time, story time, scene, summary, stretch)</li> <li>– frequency (singulative, repeating, iterative)</li> </ul> </li> <li>• place: represented by narrator/character</li> </ul>
style	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• usage</li> <li>• diction</li> <li>• register</li> <li>• tone</li> <li>• rhetorical devices</li> </ul>

Some of the more difficult literary terms (Copy 37) are defined here. Put the following terms into the correct places:

in medias res	covert narrator	register	diction	unreliable narrator	foil	story time
stretch	discourse	plot	repetitive mode	deus ex machina	iterative mode	

- \_\_\_\_\_ : a character who represents characteristics and values which are diametrically opposed to those of another character, usually the protagonist
- \_\_\_\_\_ : a writer's choice of words (formal/informal, abstract/concrete)
- \_\_\_\_\_ : a style which is appropriate to a certain situation (scientific, commercial, legal, theological, psychological)
- \_\_\_\_\_ : reflecting the causal links between the different events of the story
- \_\_\_\_\_ : the actual period of time when the events of the story 'witnessed' by the reader take place
- \_\_\_\_\_ : time suspension, time has a stop, story time is shorter than narrating time
- \_\_\_\_\_ : telling once what happened several times
- \_\_\_\_\_ : telling several times what happened once
- \_\_\_\_\_ : here: referring to all the manipulations of the story that normally occur in a narrative, all the material an author adds to a story
- \_\_\_\_\_ : the convention of beginning 'in the middle of things', rather than at the very start of the story
- \_\_\_\_\_ : a narrator who neither refers to him/herself nor addresses any narratees, one who has a neutral (nondistinctive) voice
- \_\_\_\_\_ : a narrator who gives his/her own understanding of a story, instead of the interpretation the author wishes the audience to obtain (see Henry James)
- \_\_\_\_\_ : some improbable, unexpected, artificial device, character or event which is suddenly introduced to resolve a situation (e.g. the impoverished hero is saved by an unexpected inheritance)