

13

CHAPTER

Achieving Basic Comprehension of Literary Works



THE SKILL

ACHIEVING BASIC COMPREHENSION OF LITERARY WORKS

If you are like most college students, you will be required to take one or more literature courses as part of your degree program. Even students who feel confident about other subjects may feel a little uneasy about literature courses because the type of reading required in them seems so different from other college reading assignments.

Let's see if we can't take some of the mystery out of it, but first a word from your coach: Reading literature can be a true pleasure, a wonderful break from the rest of your day (or your life!). It can give you insight into life's big issues (often the insights are called "universal truths") as well as insight into human nature, including your own. You learn that throughout history, people in all places and in various circumstances have faced the same major issues in life. That's exactly what makes "great literature" great: it transcends time and place. It helps us understand our own lives, experiences, and emotions. Great literature holds a mirror up so that we can see ourselves as we truly are. If you feel at this point in your life that you don't like literature, at least keep an open mind. Through the "book club" Oprah Winfrey started on her show, thousands of adults have discovered how engrossing, thought provoking, and enjoyable reading novels can be.

You never know what might turn you on to books. One simple way is to keep leisure reading books handy—one in your backpack or book bag, in your car, on

the treadmill book holder—anywhere that you’re likely to read when you have a few free minutes. An Arabian proverb says, “A novel is a garden carried in the pocket.” Few people have unlimited amounts of free time to lounge around and read—certainly not most college students. But you’ll be pleasantly surprised how many books you can read in a year by reading just 15 to 20 minutes a day.

One of the great benefits of reading is that the more of it you do, the more you’re able to understand other things you read later on. The reason is that “prior knowledge” (what you already know) is such a potent comprehension factor. As you read, you add to your background knowledge. That knowledge is then available to help you understand things you read in the future. Remember that the meaning is in the reader, not in the printed symbols on the page. You “comprehend” whenever you successfully link up what you already know with the information an author is presenting. If you know little or nothing about a subject (which is the case when you take college courses that are new to you), you may find it a bit daunting at first. If you take additional subjects in the same area, they are usually not as hard because you have a framework for understanding them. In a sense, the same is true for literature. The bottom line: the more you read, the more you will understand and enjoy what you read.

There’s another reason it’s important for you to establish the habit of leisure reading: Children who read come from homes in which the adults read. If (or when) you have children of your own, it’s important for them to see you reading and for you to read to them. There’s no greater gift you can give your children that will help them more in school than to read to them on a regular basis when they are young. (And there’s no greater hypocrisy than saying to a child, “Reading is important” when you never pick up a book yourself! Your children will go by what you do, not by what you say.) As your children get older, take them to the public library every week or two. There is an even more long-term benefit to helping your child become a reader: In today’s “information age” the people who are ultimately going to be the most successful are the ones who are skilled readers. And if that weren’t enough, being a good reader makes a person a better writer. (This is only logical: no one can write at a level above the one at which he or she reads.) Children who get off to a good start in reading and who read a lot are also likely to become the best writers. (This isn’t limited to childhood. Improving your reading at this point in your own life will make you a better writer.)

Once you become a “reader,” you may find that you want to reread certain books or poems. Some of them become old friends, to be enjoyed over and over again. Also, you may discover that the same literary work will mean different things to you at different points in your life. As you acquire more life experience, your own perspective changes. A novel you read about a teenager struggling to become an adult will mean something very different to you if you reread it at age 40 than it did when you read it for the first time at the age of 18. A poem you read in high school about what happened on a particular battlefield will mean something very different to you if you reread it later after visiting there.

Finally, remember that a reader’s response, both with the mind and the heart, is what makes the reading experience complete. Responding intellectually and emotionally to literary works, seeing how they connect with your own life and experiences, is what makes them “yours.” Ask yourself what a short story, novel, poem, play, or essay might have to do with your life. Perhaps a novel changes your concept of what you think courage is, or an essay changes your position on a certain issue; perhaps you see yourself or a situation in your life in a different way after reading a short story or a poem. In response to a literary work, you may disagree or agree; you may see things in a new light; you may find that a deeply held belief of yours is affirmed; you may be disgusted, angry, uplifted, inspired, charmed, or amused. Different readers will have different responses. The important thing is that you think about what you have read and that you respond to it. Edmund Burke, an 18th century politician and writer, said, “To read without reflecting is like eating without digesting.”

Having said all of that, let me tell you about my goal in this chapter. My goal is to give you an introduction to comprehending literature so that you will be more successful in your college literature courses. The reason I entitled this chapter “Achieving Basic Comprehension of Literary Works” is because I want you at the very least to be able to read a literary work and grasp the essential, literal information in it. You must be able to do that before you can explore the deeper, interpretive meaning(s) of the work.

You’re going to encounter lots of new terms (literary terms) in this chapter. Don’t let this overwhelm you. You may not understand or remember all of them at first. That’s okay.

Now let’s get down to business. There are two main types of literature: informative and imaginative. Informative writing is nonfiction or expository writing (writing that gives information or explanations). The informative category includes essays, speeches that have been written down, biographies and autobiographies (in which the author tells about another person’s life or his or her own life), as well as journals (records of daily experiences) and diaries (people’s records of daily happenings and their innermost thoughts and reflections). The other major category of literature, imaginative writing, is also exactly what it sounds like: writing which the author creates out of his or her imagination. This type of writing is more commonly called fiction; it is made up by the author rather than based directly on truth or fact. Imaginative writing includes short stories, novels, plays, and poems.

You will hear the word “genre” (zhǎn’ rě) used in literature courses. A genre is a category of literature composition that has a distinctive style, form, or content. There are four major literary genres: essays (and other nonfiction, such as journals, diaries, etc.), fiction (short stories and novels), drama (plays), and poetry. Of these, we’re going to look at essays and fiction, and take a peek at poetry. I’m not going to address plays separately. However, many of the same elements for understanding other forms of literature apply to them.

At this point we have to talk a minute about the structure of a literary work. Structure is the design of a literary work, how the parts are arranged and presented. Novels and short stories have a typical structure, which is described below. Essays present a thesis or idea that is developed and supported. Poetry is usually written in stanzas, groups of related lines. Plays are presented in units called acts, which contain smaller units called scenes.

ESSAYS AND OTHER NONFICTION

Even though the focus of this chapter is reading fiction, I want to say a little about essays because you will be asked to read (as well write) essays in college literature courses. What exactly is an essay? An essay is a short, nonfiction composition on a single subject, designed to present information or the personal view of the author. In fact, it is called a personal essay or descriptive essay when the author’s purpose is to describe or share personal experiences or thoughts with readers. Authors write expository essays when the purpose is to explain something or present information in a very direct way. When they want to persuade readers to accept their positions on issues, they write argumentative essays. Authors write critical essays when the goal is to analyze, evaluate, or critique something, such as an artistic or literary work, a political ideology, or a scientific concept. In a narrative essay, writers use a story or a series of incidents to illustrate an idea. (A “narrative” is a story or an account of something; “narrative” describes writing that is done in a story-telling style.) You don’t need to memorize the types of essays. The point is, authors write essays for a variety of reasons.

There are other types of nonfiction besides essays. Authors write autobiographies and biographies to tell about their lives or someone else’s. In personal narratives or other narratives, authors recount the story of an experience they have had

or someone else has had (such as how they set out to live alone in the woods for a year or how they overcame a serious illness or accident, etc.). Journals and diaries are forms of writing in which authors record daily life events and, in the case of diaries, thoughts and reflections that go beyond the actual events.

FICTION

You already know that fiction refers to writing that comes from the author's imagination. We're going to focus on the two most common forms, short stories and novels. (Plays are also fictional works. The elements described below also pertain to them, but drama has a few other additional elements.)

When discussing works of fiction, we use special terms to describe the who, what, when, where, why, and how—the basic elements—of a short story, novel, or play. These special terms are not a big deal, so don't feel intimidated by them. (Wouldn't you still recognize your friend "Bill" regardless of whether other people call him Billy, William, Will, or even "Ace"?) The literary terms in bold italics below are ones that your professor will use to refer to what you can think of as the who, what, when, where, why, and how of a literary work:

- Who** The main character or protagonist is simply who the story or play is about; the most important person. (There may be other important characters as well.) Ask yourself who the most important character is. Ask yourself who the important supporting characters are.
- What** The plot is the what: the action that is taking place, the "story," or what the main character is trying to accomplish. There are usually some less important plots called, logically enough, subplots. There is typically **conflict**, some obstacle or opponent the main character has to overcome. The opposing forces can take many forms. It may be person versus person (the main character has to overcome an opponent or opponents, such as a cruel relative, members of a rival gang, or a corrupt politician). It may be the protagonist versus himself or herself (a person struggles with a mental illness, an addiction, lack of self-belief, choosing between what duty requires and what the person wants to do, etc.). Conflict may also take the form of the person versus external forces, such as the environment (the protagonist sets out to swim across the English Channel or battles a raging forest fire) or circumstances (the protagonist is caught in a political uprising while traveling abroad and cannot escape the country). There can be more than one conflict or type of conflict. For example, a teenager who is trying to elude a kidnapper (person versus person) becomes lost in the mountain wilderness and struggles for survival against hunger, thirst, and cold (person versus external forces), but also struggles with fear and loneliness (person versus himself or herself). The conflict is usually resolved by the end of the story.
- When** The setting consists of the when and where. When does the story take place (past, present, or future)? Where does the story take place (in a real location or an imaginary one)? What are the circumstances? The story may take place in a single location or in several locations; the events may happen in a short period of time or over a long period of time that may even span the past, present, and future.
- Why** The theme is the why. The theme is the overall main idea, the most important "message" or lesson the author wants readers to come away understanding. For example, any of these could be an author's theme: Courage is the supreme virtue; we cause our own misery; or family is the most important aspect of our lives. As noted earlier, these important life lessons are also called universal truths because they apply to all

human beings everywhere. Usually readers will have to figure out the theme from the characters' words and actions in the story.

How The technique is the how. This refers to the way the author presents the material (for example, a character has “flashbacks” to earlier times; the author presents various character’s perceptions of the same event; the story is told as a series of dreams, or the story describes a literal or figurative journey a character makes). Technique also includes the **point of view** from which the story is told, that is, whose eyes the action is viewed through, or who is telling the story. The point of view is usually first person or third person. First person point of view means that the main character is telling the story using the word “I.” Also, one of the other characters in the story can serve as the first person narrator (storyteller), who presents the events through his or her eyes. The other very common point of view is third person. Third person point of view means that an omniscient (all-knowing) narrator acts as an observer who tells the story by recounting the characters’ thoughts and actions. In the third person point of view, the narrator uses the pronouns “he”, “she,” and “they.” Second person point of view uses the pronoun “you.” Second person point of view is not commonly used, however. (Quick huddle with the coach: Don’t confuse point of view in a fictional work with point of view that you learned about in Chapter 9. As you will recall, point of view in nonfiction refers to the author’s position [opinion] on a controversial issue.)

Of course, you will also need to use other critical reading and literary skills you’ve learned in previous chapters of *Exercise Your College Reading Skills*. For example, the author’s (or character’s) **tone** is important because tone reveals the person’s attitude toward the subject (or toward other characters).

Other important elements are imagery and symbolism. Authors typically use imagery to represent objects, actions, or ideas. Imagery has many definitions, but your literature professor will probably use the term **imagery** to refer to a group of related images (sensory details) that arouse emotions in the reader. **Symbolism** refers to using objects or actions to represent something more than themselves. For example, the imagery in a short story might include a parakeet escaping from its cage and flying out through an open door, a kite breaking free from its string and floating away, and children joyously pouring out the doors of the school on the last day of class. In this case, the symbolism of the imagery suggests breaking free, getting a fresh start, or breaking out of old habits and patterns. Another example would be a young pioneer boy who picks up his dead father’s coat and puts it on. The author might use that imagery to symbolize that the boy knows he must now take over his father’s role as the head of the family. Incidentally, the same image can mean different things in different literary works. Water, for instance, might symbolize birth, renewal, purification, the flow of time, destruction (floods, tidal waves, storms at sea), or a washing away of the past.

Figures of speech, which you learned about in Chapter 12, are very important in literary material. Watch in particular for similes and metaphors which, as you know, are comparisons that paint pictures in the reader’s mind.

I mentioned earlier that different literary genres have certain structures. Stories typically have a beginning, middle, and an end. (Ask any child to tell you a fairy tale and nearly all of them will begin with “Once upon a time,” tell you all of the action that occurred, and then finish with “and they lived happily ever after.”) Novels are much longer than short stories, and they have more characters and subplots. Short stories are more likely to focus on the main character’s development as a person or on a single incident. (In either case, the author will use characters’ words and actions to reveal what they are like.)

Short stories and novels have plots that normally follow this pattern: First, there is the exposition, in which the author introduces the characters, lets us know when and where the action is taking place, and provides any other information we need to make sense of the action. Now we need something to happen, so the author begins introducing conflicts or complications. Things start to go wrong for the main character and the suspense rises. This comprises most of the story. Toward the end comes the climax, the point at which there is the greatest tension. This is also called the “turning point” because whatever happens here (such as an important decision the protagonist makes, a murder, lovers who leave each other, the main character misses a train, etc.) shapes the final outcome of the story. The action tapers off (“falling action”) as the pieces of the plot and subplot begin to be untangled and resolved; this is termed the denouement or resolution. By the end, the complications have been resolved and everything is clarified for the reader.

Skilled writers don’t feel compelled to follow this structure of plot sequence as if it were a strict formula, so you will encounter variations. However, it still serves as a helpful blueprint for most short stories and novels.

POETRY

Poems were meant to be spoken or read aloud because the sound is important and reinforces the meaning. Poets draw on their imaginations to present emotions, significant truths, and sensory impressions. Poets use figurative language and imagery to compress a great deal of meaning into a relatively small “package.” (You may want to review the figures of speech defined in the The Edge section of Chapter 12.) Some types of poems rhyme, and they follow very specific patterns of rhyme. Other types of poems, such as blank verse and free verse, do not rhyme. There are several specific types of poems, such as:

lyric poem	a short poem that expresses a highly personal, single impression of some basic emotion or state of mind. Three types of lyric poems are: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ ode: a long, formal, complex poem usually written to commemorate or celebrate some special occasion, object, or quality ■ pastoral poem: a poem that presents an idealized picture of rural life ■ dramatic monologue: a poem in which the speaker addresses someone who may or may not seem to be present, but whose replies are not recorded
elegy	a solemn, formal, reflective poem, usually written about death
narrative poem	a poem that tells a story, and like any story, has a setting, characters, and a plot <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ epic: a long narrative poem with heroes and adventures, that has a national, worldwide, or cosmic setting
sonnet	a poem of 14 iambic pentameter lines (that means each line has a certain pattern of rhythm and accented syllables) with a very specific rhyme scheme

At this point, it is not important that you remember the types of poems (although you may want to save this material for later reference). What is important is that you understand there are many types of poems, that poems are written for a variety of reasons, and that poetry does not have to rhyme.

THE TECHNIQUE

APPLY THE LITERARY COUNTERPARTS OF BASIC COMPREHENSION SKILLS

Regardless of what you are reading, there are certain, basic elements you have to understand in order to make sense of it. You now know that, at the very least, you have to understand the who, what, when, where, why, and how of literary material you read. Let's look at how you can approach essays, nonfiction prose, short stories and novels, and poems. Keep in mind that whenever you read literary material, you will probably need to reread parts of it a second or even a third time. If it is a short story or a poem, you may need to read the entire work more than once. The first time through, simply try to get an overall sense of what's going on. Get the basic, literal meaning (the information in it). If it is a fictional work, you can then focus on the interpretive meaning (the underlying meaning or the significance of the work) and, perhaps, on the author's style, if that is also something your professor wants to emphasize.

ESSAYS AND OTHER NONFICTION LITERARY WORKS

Let's talk about essays first. When you read an essay, the place to start, of course, is with the title. It generally gives the topic. Even if it doesn't tell you the topic, it will at least give you a clue to the topic. Some titles are clever ones whose meaning becomes fully apparent only after you have read the essay.

As a rule, the essay itself begins with an introduction. The author may use the introduction to capture the reader's interest, to introduce the general topic, to give background information, or to present the thesis (overall main idea) of the essay. If the author does not present the thesis at the beginning, it will either be presented at the end or left to the reader to infer.

The introduction is followed by the middle, or body, of the essay. This section may be quite lengthy. In it, the essayist develops the thesis. Depending on the type of essay and the author's purpose for writing it, the author may use the body of the essay to present more information, discuss different aspects of the topic, give examples, or provide proof or support for the thesis.

If the writer does not present the thesis at the beginning of the essay, he or she may present it at the end as the conclusion. In other words, the writer tells the one, most important point he or she has been leading up to. Even if the writer has stated the thesis at the beginning of the essay, the writer may restate it for emphasis at the end of the essay.

You'll need to read most essays (or at least parts of them) more than once. Read all of an essay straight through the first time. Try to follow the author's train of thought; after all, the writer is presenting the information in a way that makes sense to him or her. Don't pick up your pen or highlighter yet!

The second reading is the time to reach for a pen, because by then you have a general sense of what's in the essay and how it's organized. To help you see more precisely how the author has organized the information, label the parts of the essay in the margin. Depending on the type of essay, you might write, for example, introduction, thesis, background information, example, 1st proof, 2nd proof, reason 1, reason 2, conclusion, etc. You can also jot the topic in the margin beside each paragraph so that you can see the aspects of the overall topic the author uses to develop the essay. Put a question mark in the margin beside anything that you don't understand. Underline words you don't understand, then go back and look them up in a dictionary. (You may find it helpful not only to jot things in the margin, but to take notes on notebook paper. You'll learn more about the skills of annotating, note taking, outlining and summarizing in Chapter 15.) It may help you, too, to find out something about the author of the essay if you do not know anything about the person. Also, find out when the essay was written and if there were significant circumstances that caused the author to write it.

With essays, you should apply the comprehension skills you have already learned in this book. After you have read the entire essay, go back and reflect on each element listed below. You can jot your responses to these in the margins of the essay or on notebook paper:

Title	The title will either tell you the topic or give you a hint about it.
Thesis	This is the overall main idea, a general statement that sums up the writer's most important point. Depending on the author's purpose and the type of essay, the author may announce the overall main idea either at the beginning, at the end (as a conclusion), or do both. Or, the writer may give readers enough information so that they can infer the thesis. The thesis may be simple and straightforward, or it may take you several minutes, thoughtful reflection, and several attempts to come up with a clear, accurate formulation of it. This is normal; don't think that even skilled readers can cruise through essays, going, "Yeah, got it!" on the first reading.
Development	Look in the body of the essay for details that give support or evidence. The author will use examples, reasons, personal experience or observation, research findings, and so forth, to develop or prove the thesis.
Tone	Determine the author's attitude toward the topic by examining the author's choice of words and writing style. Is the writer being humorous? sarcastic? critical? Is the writer delighted? angry? disgusted? If you misread the author's tone, you may miss the point completely.
Purpose	Determine the author's reason for writing the essay. The author's tone will also help you discern the purpose, whether it is to inform, instruct, persuade, or entertain.
Audience	Determine who the author had in mind as readers—a specific person, a certain group, or the general public.

With other types of nonfiction prose, such as autobiography, biography, diaries, and journals, you still need to seek certain basic information as your starting point:

- Who is writing or speaking?
- To whom is the writer speaking (the audience)?
- What event or events is the writing describing?
- What are the writer's feelings? (Even if the writer doesn't say straight out, you can tell from the tone.)
- What is the meaning or significance of the experience the writer is describing (what did the author hope to achieve by writing it)?
- What relevance might the experience have to your life?

SHORT STORIES AND NOVELS

Keep in mind what I said earlier: you will have to read some parts of a novel or short story more than once. This doesn't mean there's anything wrong with you. That's just what it takes. Jot down notes in the margins and on notebook paper. Pencil in a question mark beside things you don't understand. These confusing parts may become clearer as the story develops because authors use foreshadowing. That is, they drop hints or clues about things that are going to happen later on. A character's action that seemed puzzling may suddenly make perfect sense later in the story.

Reread in order to identify the who, what, when, where, why, and how elements:

- protagonist—Ask yourself, Who is the main character? Who are the other significant characters?
- plot—Ask yourself, What sequence of events takes place?
- conflict(s)—Ask yourself, What obstacle(s) must the protagonist overcome?
- setting—Ask yourself, When and where does the story take place? What is the context in which the action occurs? (I just wanted to slip in the word context since you learned it in Chapter 1 on vocabulary!)
- theme—Ask yourself, Why has the author told this story? What is the author’s important message or lesson? (And how is this relevant to your life?) Consider what the significance of the title of the short story or novel might be. The title usually relates to the theme.
- technique—Ask yourself, How has the author presented the story?

Also, think about the

- point of view—Ask yourself, Who is telling the story?
- imagery—Ask yourself, Are there certain images that recur?
- symbolism—Ask yourself, What is the meaning of the imagery?

If you purchased a paperback copy of a novel, you may find it helpful to take notes inside the back cover of the book. If there isn’t enough blank space, use large (3" × 5" or 4" × 6") sticky notes and press them inside the back of the book. Jot down the names of the characters as they are introduced and include a brief description of each. As you learn more about the characters, and as other characters are introduced, add to your notes. For example, if you were reading Tolstoy’s famous novel *Anna Karenina*, you might jot down:

Anna Karenina—beautiful, headstrong wife of Karenin; falls in love with Count Vronsky

Count Vronsky—wealthy army officer who returns Anna’s love; thoughtful and generous in many ways, but doesn’t think anything of taking Anna away from her husband

Alexei Karenin—Anna’s husband; a cold, ambitious public official who thinks only of himself

On various pages of the novel, you can also note what is happening (“Vronsky injured in racetrack accident. Anna shows her true feelings for him.”) Of course, you can use abbreviations in your marginal annotations (for instance, you could use “A” for Anna and “V” for Vronsky).

You can also pencil in the back of the book brief notes about the setting (“set in Moscow in the 1800s”). Jot down things you do not understand by writing a list of questions on a separate sheet of paper or at the tops of pages (“Did Anna commit suicide on impulse?”). As you find the answers or things become clear, write down the answers. If you keep a list of questions, you can ask in class about ones you were unable to answer for yourself. (An example of a question would be, “Opening line is ‘All happy families are alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.’ What does Tolstoy mean by this? Who in the story is the ‘happy family’? Who represents the ‘unhappy’ one?”) I also like to write down unfamiliar words and the page on which they appeared. When I have a chance, I look them up and jot the definition beside them. (As you recall from Chapter 1, learning words in context is the best, most meaningful way to learn them.)

POEMS

Read the poem aloud. If it is not too long, read it aloud again or listen as someone else reads it to you. Use the following elements to help you understand the poem. In addition, think about the sound of the words the poet has chosen and how they reinforce the meaning, or in some cases clash with the meaning.

- Think about the title and how it fits with the poem. What event or action occurs in the poem?
- Who is speaking, being addressed, or being discussed in the poem?
- What images and figurative language are included in the poem?
- What does the imagery symbolize?
- What is the tone of the poem?
- What is the theme of the poem?

After the first reading of the poem, go back through it to mark it and to make annotations beside the lines and stanzas. Underline words or phrases that seem important. Were there words, phrases, or images that confused or puzzled you? If so, circle them and any references in the poem that you do not understand. At the first opportunity, look these up or ask about them. Write questions in the margin. Ask yourself what feelings you had as you read it. Notice if there are certain phrases or images that elicited a strong response in you.

Write a word or phrase beside each stanza that tells what it seems to be about (the topic). Ask yourself how the parts of the poem fit together. More than one interpretation of a poem is possible, of course, but some interpretations make more sense than others. You should be able to explain what it was in the poem that you based your conclusions and inferences on. Also, find out about the person who wrote the poem and what the circumstances were; it may give you some additional insight.

The more poetry you read, the better you will become at interpreting poems and the more you will enjoy it. (“Practice, practice, practice!”) I suggested at the beginning of this chapter that in reading, “the rich get richer” (people who have money can use it to make more money). In other words, the more you read, the more you will be able to read and understand. Nowhere is this truer than in poetry. Poets often make allusions (references) in their poems to characters in mythology, to other (usually ancient) literary works, to the Bible, to other poets and poems, and to significant people and events in world history. Each time you read a poem and figure out the allusions and references in it, you will be better able to read, understand, and enjoy subsequent poems.

As you can see, reading literature involves applying the literary counterparts of the basic comprehension skills to get the essential information from it. Interpreting literature also involves a great deal of inferencing and drawing conclusions, skills you learned in Chapter 8.

THE TRAINER

APPLYING THE SKILL OF BASIC COMPREHENSION OF LITERARY WORKS

Because there are several skills involved in interpreting each type of literary work and because this chapter is intended to provide a basic introduction, I’m only going to show the applications of the skills to an essay, an excerpt from a work of fiction (a short story), and a stanza of a poem. As always, read the selection first, then go back and read the effective reader’s thoughts as he or she processes the material.

The first is an essay entitled “Our Right to Bear Muskets.” I’ve placed the effective reader’s “thoughts” beneath the essay because the thoughts are longer and more complicated. The thoughts appear in the order that the reader had them, para-

graph by paragraph. You may need to read this more than once. That's all right. If you're confused about any point the author is making in the essay, you will find that the reader's thoughts clarify it for you. (I've numbered the paragraphs to make it easier for you to match up the effective reader's "thoughts" with them.)

Our Right to Bear Muskets
Sounds a lot safer than "our right to bear Uzis"

1 Last week the news broke that the Stone Age "Iceman," a corpse whose discovery in an Alpine glacier a couple of years ago captured so much attention, was the victim of a homicide, not an accidental fall as had been initially thought. A flint arrowhead was discovered deep inside his left shoulder. It had lodged there after causing massive internal damage to the heart, lungs and other organs.

2 It was eerie to have our violent origins reinforced once again. But that news item might have been lost in the daily paper, so filled is it with other, contemporary stories about the same menace—human nature. With our propensity to destroy one another so clear, it just makes sense to do everything possible to reduce the chances that momentary anger, jealousy, depression or carelessness might result in sudden death.

3 I personally don't have anything against the Second Amendment of the Constitution, which protects citizens' rights to bear arms. Still, nothing more crucial faces our society than its rapid amendment. If we don't address our country's gun policies, I can only foresee continued escalating violence, random gun deaths and lethal mayhem in the United States, while the rest of the world watches in aghast fascination. Their choice will be to copy us (the route the least advanced will take) or to flee from us (the course Europe, Japan and other more sophisticated societies seem likely to adopt).

4 The problem with the Second Amendment is that its drafters just weren't specific enough. We know what they meant—unfortunately what they wrote down has put Uzis in the hands of teenage gangs and rocket launchers in the outhouses of sundry paramilitarists.

5 See, if they'd only used flintlock when they meant flintlock, we'd all be a heck of a lot safer than we are today.

6 Instead, they chose the word "arms." Of course "arms" in those days meant flintlocks. They couldn't possibly have imagined the mischief that's occurring a couple centuries later. Now, because they got a little careless with language, a loophole opened up through which have poured AK47s, M-1 machine guns and automatic, high-tech weapons capable of wiping out the entire Continental Army in one quick afternoon firefight.

7 This is the point in the argument where you can count on the lunatic wing of the gun lobby to begin pointing out how dangerous it would be if individual home owners weren't permitted to stash enough weaponry to keep the Fifth Army at bay. "That's what's kept this country free all these years" (or some similar rant), they will argue. "Without side arms it would only be a matter of days until the Feds would come in to grab property, first-born children or chattel."

8 In fact, it's been the Fifth Army that's kept outside invaders away while Tom Paine, the ACLU, Legal Aid attorneys and their ilk, not rifles and pistols, have actually kept us free against internal threats.

9 On those occasions when a homeowner has resorted to gunplay to hold off the revenooers, G-men or whatever pejorative they are using for government employees, the courts have invariably held that "that isn't what the Second Amendment permits."

10 Debating whether or not to permit concealed weapons also doesn't advance freedom very far. It is discouragingly similar to the old Cold War argument about having to maintain a "mutual nuclear retaliation capability." If the other side thinks you can harnmer them hard, they might not ever start a fight. We were fortunate the theory never got tested, and we were fortunate the accidental nuclear apocalypse never occurred.

11 When a whole society is packing firepower, though, I can't believe our luck will hold for long. Instead of taking this enormous gamble, why not act to bring lethal weapon technology under control? Give

them flintlocks if they have to play with guns. By the time they've cleared, re-loaded and fired a second time, their tantrum would be spent and their target could be safely out of range.

- 12 We may not be able to legislate homicide out of existence, but we sure ought to make it a whole lot harder to effect.

Source: Jerry Ortiz y Pino, "Our Right to Bear Muskets," *Santa Fe Reporter*, August 1–7, 2001, p. 10. Reproduced by permission of the *Santa Fe Reporter*.

"Our Right. . . ." From the title, it sounds like it's going to be about our Constitutional right to bear arms. Not sure about the "muskets" part. They were a type of gun our forefathers used a couple of hundred years ago. And then there's that little subtitle that mentions Uzis. An Uzi is a type of automatic weapon. This is from a newspaper column, so I think the author is going to have a definite point of view about guns and gun ownership.

In the first paragraph the writer is talking about how a Stone Age "Iceman" died violently. Definitely an interest grabber. Let's see where he goes from here.

Ahh—there's the connection. In paragraph 2, he's talking about human beings' violent nature. He seems to be leading into his argument—that it makes sense to do everything possible to reduce the chances of temporary emotions causing someone to impulsively commit murder.

Now in paragraph 3, he's zeroing in on it: he thinks it's crucial that the Second Amendment—he tells what it is, the right to bear arms—be amended. That was a little tricky at first: He wants to *amend*—change—the Second Amendment. He wants it changed, and he tells us what he thinks will happen if we don't make changes: violence, gun deaths, and mayhem will escalate; and other countries will either copy us or flee from us.

He spends paragraphs 4, 5, and 6 explaining what he sees as the cause of the problem: those who wrote the Second Amendment weren't specific enough. They couldn't foresee what "arms" would be like in future centuries, and today the "arms" include automatic, high-tech weapons, such as Uzis, rocket launchers, AK47s, and M-1 machine guns.

In paragraphs 7, 8, 9, and 10, he refutes these claims. He says it is our military ("the Fifth Army") that has protected us from other nations, and that it's the political and legal processes (Revolutionary War patriot and writer "Tom Paine, the ACLU, Legal Aid attorneys") which have protected our rights within our country. In neither case has it been citizens with guns. And when citizens have used guns against representatives of our government in the past, the courts ruled that the Second Amendment didn't permit it.

In paragraph 10 he says people carry guns to protect themselves from *other* people who might be carrying guns. He obviously doesn't think that's very logical—or safe—reasoning.

In paragraph 11 he continues with this idea: awful things are bound to happen when everyone is armed, so it makes more sense to limit the kind of weapons ordinary citizens can own. Now he's adding a little humor to show that he doesn't oppose gun ownership completely. He facetiously suggests that we give flintlocks to those who want to own guns. Those are guns from a couple of hundred years ago that took lots of time to load and then weren't very accurate. That's kind of neat. He started off talking about old guns (muskets) and now he's coming full circle by suggesting that for people who insist on having guns, that we go back to that old—and less effective—type of gun (the flintlock).

Let's see how he winds this up. In the final paragraph he restates his argument: We need to act now to bring lethal—deadly—weapon technology under control. He acknowledges that making the Second Amendment more specific, so that it controls the types of guns, won't end homicide. He does think, however, that it would make it harder for murders to occur.

The purpose of his essay is to persuade readers to accept his point of view (the Second Amendment needs to be changed so that it limits or defines the types of guns citizens can own). His topic is serious, but he often uses humor to get his point across.

Let's turn now to an excerpt from a short story (fiction) to see how our effective reader might process it. It's from "I Stand Here Ironing" and appears in a book of short stories by Tillie Olsen. Olsen is known for her portrayal of women, especially those who struggle with working-class poverty. Although this is just an excerpt, you'll see that the effective reader can still deduce a great deal about the life of the narrator and her daughter by picking up on the clues in the main character's words and thoughts. The effective reader's thoughts appear in color after the excerpt. Of course, in the "real world," the effective reader would jot his or her ideas beside the paragraphs or on separate paper (rather than beneath the excerpt).

If the selection seems challenging or perplexing, that's okay. The effective reader's thoughts will unravel some of the "mysteries." Once again, I've numbered the paragraphs so that you can match up the reader's thoughts with them.

I Stand Here Ironing

1 I stand here ironing, and what you asked me moves tormented back
and forth with the iron.

2 "I wish you would manage the time to come in and talk with me
about your daughter. I'm sure you can help me understand her. She's a
youngster who needs help and whom I'm deeply interested in helping."

3 "Who needs help. . . ." Even if I came, what good would it do? You
think because I am her mother I have a key, or that in some way you
could use me as a key? She has lived for nineteen years. There is all that
life that has happened outside of me, beyond me.

4 And when is there time to remember, to sift, to weigh, to estimate,
to total? I will start and there will be an interruption and I will have to
gather it all together again. Or I will become engulfed with all I did or
did not do, with what should have been and what cannot be helped.

5 She was a beautiful baby. The first and only one of our five that was
beautiful at birth. You do not guess how new and uneasy her tenancy
in her now-loveliness. You did not know her all those years she was
thought homely, or see her poring over her baby pictures, making me
tell her over and over how beautiful she had been—and would be, I
would tell her—and was now, to the seeing eye. But the seeing eyes
were few or non-existent. Including mine.

6 I nursed her. They feel that's important nowadays. I nursed all the
children, but with her, with all the fierce rigidity of first motherhood, I
did like the books then said. Though her cries battered me to trembling
and my breasts ached with swollenness, I waited till the clock decreed.

7 Why do I put that first? I do not even know if it matters, or if it explains
anything.

8 She was a beautiful baby. She blew shining bubbles of sound. She
loved motion, loved light, loved color and music and textures. She
would lie on the floor in her blue overalls patting the surface so hard
in ecstasy her hands and feet would blur. She was a miracle to me, but
when she was eight months old I had to leave her daytimes with the
woman downstairs to whom she was no miracle at all, for I worked or
looked for work and for Emily's father, who "could no longer endure"
(he wrote in his good-bye note) "sharing want with us."

9 I was nineteen. It was the pre-relief, pre-WPA world of the depression.
I would start running as soon as I got off the streetcar, running up the stairs,
the place smelling sour, and awake or asleep to startle awake, when she
saw me she would break into a clogged weeping that could not be com-
forted, a weeping I can hear yet.

10 After a while I found a job hashing at night so I could be with her
days, and it was better. But it came to where I had to bring her to his
family and leave her.

11 It took a long time to raise the money for her fare back. Then she got
chicken pox and I had to wait longer. When she finally came, I hardly
knew her, walking quick and nervous like her father, looking like her father,
thin, and dressed in a shoddy red that yellowed her skin and glared at the
pockmarks. All the baby loveliness gone.

12 She was two. Old enough for nursery school they said, and I did not
know then what I know now—the fatigue of the long day, and the lac-
erations of group life in the kinds of nurseries that are only parking
places for children.

13 Except that it would have made no difference if I had known. It was
the only place there was. It was the only way we could be together, the
only way I could hold a job.

14 And even without knowing, I knew. I knew the teacher was evil
because all these years it has curdled into my memory, the little boy
hunched in the corner, her rasp, "why aren't you outside, because Alvin
hits you? That's no reason, go out, scaredy." I knew Emily hated it even
if she did not clutch and implore "don't go Mommy" like the other chil-
dren, mornings.

15 She always had a reason why we should stay home. Momma, you
look sick, Momma. I feel sick. Momma, the teachers aren't there today,
they're sick. Momma, we can't go, there was a fire there last night.
Momma, its a holiday today, no school, they told me.

- 16 But never a direct protest, never rebellion. I think of our others in their three-, four-year-oldness—the explosions, the tempers, the denunciations, the demands—and I feel suddenly ill. I put the iron down. What in me demanded that goodness in her? And what was the cost, the cost to her of such goodness?

Source: Tillie Olson, “I Stand Here Ironing,” from *Tell Me a Riddle*. Copyright © 1956, 1957, 1960, 1961 by Tillie Olson. Used by permission of Dell Publishing, a division of Random House, Inc.

Hmm . . . the first couple of paragraphs. The narrator is a woman who is standing there ironing. Why is she ironing? She seems to be talking with someone who has come to discuss her daughter, although she might be recalling a telephone conversation. The person—can’t tell if it’s a woman or a man—wants her to come someplace (to the daughter’s school?) to discuss her daughter because her daughter “is a youngster who needs help.”

Okay; I see in paragraphs 3 and 4 that the daughter is now nineteen years old. The mother feels that she can’t really provide any helpful information because there were so many other influences in her daughter’s life. Also, she doesn’t have the time to remember and sift through everything that happened that’s made her daughter the way she is today.

Paragraph 5. She says she doesn’t have time to remember, but now the mother begins reminiscing about her daughter when she was born. Her daughter was beautiful as a child, but the daughter considered herself homely. The mother says that although she thought her daughter was beautiful, she herself didn’t have “seeing eyes”—she couldn’t really see her baby the way she was.

In the next couple of paragraphs, she says that when her daughter was a baby, she followed what the book said about nursing her rather than trusting her own maternal instincts. She’s not sure now whether there’s any significance to that.

She loved her baby and considered Emily a miracle, but when her daughter was eight-months old, she had to leave her with a woman who didn’t think the baby was special at all. The mother had to go work, or look for work, or look for Emily’s father. Her father must have left them because she mentions his good-bye note. That takes care of paragraph 8.

Now the mother reveals that she was only nineteen herself when her daughter was born. It was during the Depression, and when she got home to her daughter after work, Emily would cry uncontrollably. The mother says she can still hear the weeping, which means after all the years she still feels sad and guilty about it. This fits with the opening line: she says she feels “tormented.”

In paragraphs 10 and 11, she continues her recollections. The baby’s father left, so she got a job waitressing so she could be with her daughter during the day. Her circumstances must have gotten worse because she was finally forced to leave Emily with her father’s family. It took her a long time to raise the money to pay her daughter’s fare to come home, and then her daughter’s return was delayed because Emily got sick. The mother finally got Emily back when Emily was two years old, and she wasn’t a baby any more. The mother felt that she no longer knew or recognized her daughter.

After that she had to put her daughter in impersonal day care, and she says that she now knows that it damaged her daughter further. She also knows that she didn’t have any choice if she wanted her daughter to live with her. She knows that the teacher was horrible and that her daughter hated being there. Even though Emily didn’t complain, she tried to think up reasons why she and her mother could stay together during the day. Reflecting on her daughter’s early years, the mother feels a terrible sadness and knows how hard it must have been on her daughter. She feels especially sad because even though the situation took a terrible toll on her little daughter, Emily never complained the way other children would have.

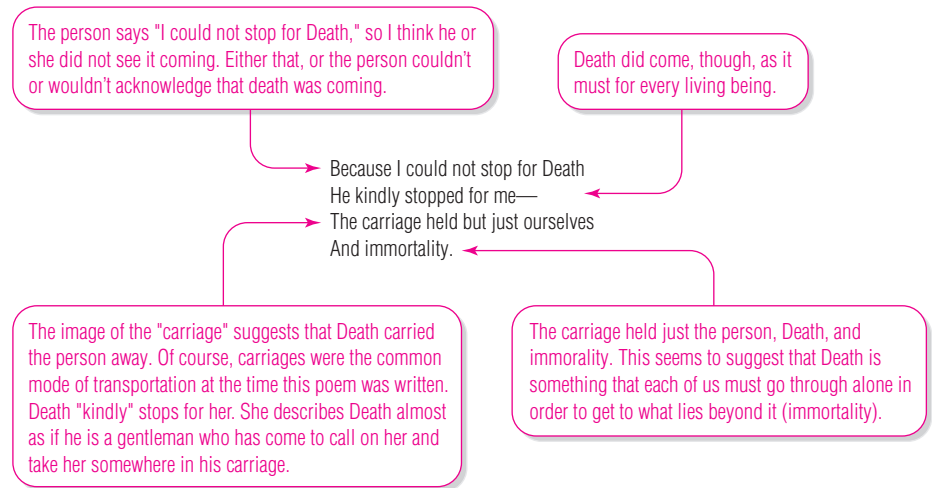
What can I make of everything so far? The woman is ironing. That’s a chore that has to be done over and over again every time the clothes are washed. It’s a humble, not very interesting task, one that gives her time to think about other things like her daughter. Perhaps the woman does ironing to earn money. It’s a low-skill job. She doesn’t stop ironing even while she is talking (or thinking) about her daughter. In the opening line, she mentions that her emotions about her daughter torment her, pulling her back and forth like the motion of the iron—sort of a tug-of-war. The title suggests this too.

This seems to be a woman who loves her daughter, who feels great sadness because her daughter at age nineteen needs help, but still doesn’t know anything she could have done to make things turn out differently, and she doesn’t know anything she can do now. She couldn’t change her own life, and she can’t help her daughter change hers. She hasn’t had many choices in her life, and this has affected her daughter as well.

There you have it! There was quite a lot that you had to infer or “read between the lines,” wasn’t there? As I mentioned earlier, you often have to do that when you interpret literature. (If you need to review making inferences, see Chapter 8.)

This excerpt in the following illustration is the first stanza of a poem by the 19th-century American poet, Emily Dickinson. She wrote most of her poems on scraps of papers and did not give them titles, so they are usually referred to by num-

bers or by their first lines. This one is called “Because I could not stop for Death.” Read the stanza, then consider the effective reader’s thoughts about it.

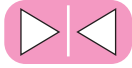


THE EDGE

POINTERS FROM THE COACH ABOUT ACHIEVING BASIC COMPREHENSION OF LITERARY WORKS

- If the literary terminology confuses you, focus at first on simply getting the basic information from the literary work.
Be patient with yourself. Concentrate initially on the who-what-why-where-why-how aspects. Being patient with yourself, though, doesn’t mean that you sit down to read an assignment, then give up five minutes later if the meaning isn’t immediately clear with you. If you stay with it, you will eventually have some “aha!” moments when you have an insight. At the very least, you can jot down any points of confusion so that you can ask about them in class next time.
- “Good literature” doesn’t necessarily make you feel good.
Many students think that a book isn’t a “good” book unless it has “happily-ever-after” ending. There is nothing wrong with happy endings, and many books have them. But don’t dismiss a book just because it doesn’t have a happy ending or it doesn’t make you feel good. The fact of the matter is that although life can be joyous, it can also be difficult, sad, unfair, and frustrating. A “good” book is one that makes you think. It makes you question things and consider them from a different point of view. Questioning and thinking can lead you to increased insight and understanding, which is more valuable than merely feeling pleased at the way a story turned out.
- The more literature you read, the more you’ll be able to read, understand, and enjoy literature.
I know, I know. I’ve already said it at least a couple of times, but it’s so true and so important that I’m going to say it one more time: Read, read, read.

THE REPLAY



REMEMBERING THE ESSENTIAL INFORMATION FROM THE CHAPTER

Review the material in this chapter. There's a lot, but look over it again anyway. Then try to respond to these items by writing your answers from memory. If you get stuck, refer to the chapter for help.

List the four major genres (categories) of literary works:

Which of those are types of imaginative writing?

Which are types of informative writing?

Define these terms that describe elements of fiction:

Protagonist: _____

Plot: _____

Conflict: _____

Setting: _____

Theme: _____

Technique: _____

Point of view: _____

THE PRACTICE

APPLY THE SKILL OF ACHIEVING BASIC COMPREHENSION OF LITERARY WORKS

The practice exercises are longer because of the nature of the selections. Your instructor may assign you to do only one set, two sets, or all three sets at once. Or, your instructor may have you work on some items in class and assign others as homework. The first set contains a piece of nonfiction from an autobiography. Set 2 presents an excerpt from a novel. Set 3 presents a poem for you to analyze.

After you read through a selection, go back and reread it, marking it and adding annotations in the margin. Then answer the questions about the basic elements of the selection. I've included a brief introduction to each work or excerpt. Before you begin, stretch, yawn, and consciously relax your muscles. Do this between the sets or as often as you need to.

SET 1**Exercises: Nonfiction (Autobiography)**

In this set, you will read one nonfiction prose excerpt. This particular one is from an autobiography.

This selection is from the book *Life Is So Good*, the autobiography of a remarkable man, George Dawson. He was born in 1898, the grandson of slaves. As a boy, he had to go to work to help support his family, so he never had a chance to learn to read. He worked all his life, and then at the age of 98 achieved a lifelong dream: he learned to read. His story has inspired people worldwide. He died in 2001 at the age of 103. Even though Dawson lived through many difficult times in this nation's history, he always maintained the positive belief that "life is so good and it gets better every day." In this excerpt, he talks about an experience he had in the 1960s, a time when the nation was struggling to begin to come to grips with segregation and racism.

- 1 Every day, we all did the best we could. The important thing, no matter what, was to keep our pride. I worked for a living and each day I did the best job I could. When I had to quit my job in 1963, I didn't stop working. Even if I wanted to, I couldn't have done that. I did yard work and gardening for people.
- 2 No matter what the work or whatever the pay, I did my best. I remember one day I was at some lady's house. It was a nice big house, one of those older ones with the large porches, in a nice neighborhood and the grounds was big. There was nice plantings all over. In the early morning she laid out a ton of work for me to do. There was a day's work, all right, actually more than one. Once she showed me what she wanted, I never forgot and could work on my own without bothering her none.
- 3 By midmorning, it was hot. Since she had mentioned water for me, I looked on the porch for a pitcher. I didn't see one and figured that she had forgotten. The water was warm, but I used the hose to quench my thirst and kept on working. Besides the garden, there was a pond to clean and a big tree with rotten limbs to come off. So, I got back to digging. This neighborhood was a long bus ride from where we lived. I left pretty early and didn't feel like a big breakfast at that time. So, by late morning, I was pretty hungry. I kept working, though, till the sun was straight up.
- 4 At the sound of the screen door slamming, I looked up and was glad to see that she was coming out on the porch. She didn't see me from the shadow of the tree, but I watched as she put down two bowls on the floor for some dogs that had come out and were by her side. I walked toward the porch. The door slammed again, but she returned in a minute with another bowl. This one she set up on a shelf that was above the reach of the dogs. She waved as she saw me coming. Pointing toward that bowl, she said, "It's homemade."

- 5 The screen door slammed again as she went back inside. I climbed up on the porch and lifted the bowl off the shelf. It was a big bowl of stew. Potatoes, big chunks of meat, and okra was all floating in some thick juices that almost made the spoon stand up. It looked good and, as hungry as I was, it smelled even better. In my other hand, I picked up a large biscuit that she had set to go with it. I was looking for a chair to sit in and a quiet spot to say grace when I looked down and saw the two dogs.
- 6 But what hit me was that she expected I would eat out on the porch with her dogs. I didn't have to eat in their dining room, but back in their kitchen would of been all right. I told myself that I was good enough to eat a meal with people, not dogs. I set the bowl back on the shelf. Being hungry, that wasn't so easy. It was even harder with the biscuit, but I set that down too.
- 7 I know she didn't plan to insult me, she just didn't know better. The stew was mighty tempting, though, and I carefully backed off the porch. My stomach had a problem, but my pride said, "No!"
- 8 All the while I was working, it was hard to keep my mind off food. I thought about Elzenia being at home and maybe cooking dinner for us. Most of the children were gone by then. We was just down to a couple still in high school, but we always had dinner together as a family.
- 9 My mind wouldn't let go. I started trying to guess if there would be mashed potatoes and chicken. But each time I guessed, it was like I could almost smell the food. That sure didn't help me get by on an empty stomach! Sometimes, the mind is funny and just does what it wants. I tried to block out food and pretty soon that's all I could think of.
- 10 That sure made it more tempting to go over and get some lunch. I had earned it, all right, and nobody but me would know the way she treated me. I wasn't one that marched in Washington or joined the marches across the South. It just wasn't me. I was old by then and it wasn't the way I had been living all those years. But something told me, "George, don't go up on that porch. You must keep your pride. Those people have been marching for you and now you can't let them down. They will be counting on you. Do this for your children!"
- 11 I set to work, sawing harder than ever. That lady was gonna get her money's worth from me, all right! But the faster pace slowed the agitation in my brain. My mind let go of its anger and settled on other things. I had my pride to keep for me and for my children, who still looked to their father.
- 12 From the beginning, family came first. No matter how many hours or even how many shifts, when I came home I left work behind. We were living in the housing project then, some government built apartments for people without a lot of rent money. I was working full-time, but it didn't pay enough for both rent and food. It was big help to us then. The projects were big apartment buildings. They were built of brick, and at the time they were brand-new. It was a nice place to live. It wasn't till later they got run down. We lived there till we moved to our first house.
- 13 We treated our children right. I hadn't been to school, but I made sure that all of them went. Every night, I listened when they showed me their work, but I never listened to any excuses. They had to take pride in themselves.
- 14 They got that pride from me and I wasn't about to let that lady take it away. I always told them, "Don't worry about what someone else thinks. Just do the right thing and take pride in yourself." I was hungry and my stomach was going to fight me on that, but I could see that I had to win. I listened to it growling but didn't give in. After cutting and stacking the wood for her, I went back and finished turning her new garden.
- 15 That was late afternoon and just when I was finishing, she came by. I hadn't even heard the door slam, but I nodded and tipped my hat when I saw her.
- 16 "You've been working hard."

- 17 "Yes, ma'am."
- 18 "I thought it might be too hot."
- 19 "No, ma'am. I'm all right," I said, though I doubt she really cared about my health.
- 20 "Good. My neighbor said you would do a good job."
- 21 We was walking back toward the house. She had seen the garden and took note of the wood I had stacked. I could see that she was pleased. She had some money folded over that she gave to me. Just then, in front of the porch, she looked up and saw the bowl of stew with the biscuit next to it.
- 22 She looked puzzled. "Didn't you see the lunch I left on the porch?"
- 23 I nodded. "I saw the dogs on the porch."
- 24 "Well, the lunch on the shelf was for you! It was a good lunch."
- 25 "Thank you. I'm sure it was. It's just that I don't eat with dogs."
- 26 As I said that, I looked her straight in the eye. I could tell she understood what I meant. She got angry and red in the face. But I didn't turn away or look down.
- 27 "Fine, then. It's your choice to waste perfectly good food. I hate to see that happen."
- 28 Despite what I was feeling inside, I kept a level voice. "I hate to see food wasted too, ma'am."
- 29 Her face softened a bit when I agreed with that. I went on, "I eat with people. I am a human being."
- 30 At my words, her face tightened and her look changed to meanness and anger. From her mother and father and back through grandparents, I could sense a hundred years of anger and fear coming out toward me.
- 31 I stood up to it and repeated, "I am a human being."
- 32 She was so angry, she couldn't speak. I waited. Finally, in a cold tone she said, "You don't need to come back anymore."
- 33 I said, "That's right. I don't need to."

Source: George Dawson and Richard Glaubman, *Life Is So Good* (New York: Random House, 2000), pp. 208–15. Copyright © 2000 by Richard Glaubman. Used by permission of Random House, Inc.

1. Who is writing or speaking?

2. To whom is the writer speaking? Who is the intended audience?

3. What incident or events is the writing describing? Where and when does the incident take place?

4. What are George Dawson's feelings and attitudes toward the woman? What is his tone when he speaks with the woman after refusing the food?

5. What is the meaning or significance of the experience George Dawson is describing? Why did he include this experience? What purpose does he hope to achieve?

6. From this excerpt, what can you infer about George Dawson?

At this point, stop to reflect on your reaction to this exercise set. What, if anything, still confuses you about analyzing nonfiction literary material?

What steps can you take to clear up any confusion you may have? Be specific.

SET 2



Exercises: Fiction (Novel Excerpt)

In Set 2, you'll read an excerpt from a novel. You know what to do in order to relax and refocus yourself before you begin!

The excerpt is from a short novel about an ordinary young man who commits a senseless murder, the trial that follows, his imprisonment, and his perceptions of the world. Albert Camus, the author, was also a philosopher whose works focused on the absurdity of the human condition. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1957. He died three years later in an automobile accident at the age of 47. In the excerpt that follows, the main character is awaiting trial for the murder he committed. In the excerpt, the main character is already in prison.

- 1 Those first months were trying, of course; but the very effort I had to make helped me through them. For instance, I was plagued by the desire for a woman—which was natural enough, considering my age. I never thought of Marie especially. I was obsessed by thoughts of this woman or that, of all the ones I'd had, all the circumstances under which I'd loved them; so much so that the cell grew crowded with their faces, ghosts of my old passions. That unsettled me, no doubt; but, at least, it served to kill time.
- 2 I gradually became quite friendly with the chief jailer, who went the rounds with the kitchen hands at mealtimes. It was he who brought up the subject of women. "That's what the men here grumble about most," he told me.
- 3 I said I felt like that myself. "There's something unfair about it," I added, "like hitting a man when he's down."
- 4 "But that's the whole point of it," he said. "That's why you fellows are kept in prison."
- 5 "I don't follow."
- 6 "Liberty," he said, "means that. You're being deprived of your liberty."
- 7 It had never before struck me in that light, but I saw his point. "That's true," I said. "Otherwise it wouldn't be a punishment."
- 8 The jailer nodded. "Yes, you're different, you can use your brains. The others can't. Still, those fellows find a way out; they do it by themselves." With which remark the jailer left my cell. Next day I did like the others.
- 9 The lack of cigarettes, too, was a trial. When I was brought to the prison, they took away my belt, my shoelaces, and the contents of my pockets, including my cigarettes. Once I had been given a cell to myself I asked to be given back, anyhow, the cigarettes. Smoking was forbidden, they informed me. That, perhaps, was what got me down the most; in fact, I suffered really badly during the first few days. I even tore off splinters from my plank bed and sucked them. All day long I felt faint and bilious. It passed my understanding why I shouldn't be allowed even to smoke; it could have done no one any harm. Later on, I understood the idea behind it; this privation, too, was part of my punishment. But, by the time I understood, I'd lost the craving, so it had ceased to be a punishment.
- 10 Except for these privations I wasn't too unhappy. Yet again, the whole problem was: how to kill time. After a while, however, once I'd learned the trick of remembering things, I never had a moment's boredom. Sometimes I would exercise my memory on my bedroom and, starting from a corner, make the round, noting every object I saw on the way. At first it was over in a minute or two. But each time I repeated the experience, it took a little longer. I made a point of visualizing every piece of furniture, and each article upon or in it, and then every detail of each article, and finally the details of the details, so to speak: a tiny dent or incrustation, or a chipped edge, and the exact grain and color of the woodwork. At the same time I forced myself to keep my inventory in mind from start to finish, in the right order and omitting no item. With the result that, after a few weeks, I could spend hours merely in listing the objects in my bedroom. I found

that the more I thought, the more details, half-forgotten or malobserved, floated up from my memory. There seemed no end to them.

11 So I learned that even after a single day's experience of the outside world a man could easily live a hundred years in prison. He'd have laid up enough memories never to be bored. Obviously, in one way, this was a compensation.

12 Then there was sleep. To begin with, I slept badly at night and never in the day. But gradually my nights became better, and I managed to doze off in the daytime as well. In fact, during the last months, I must have slept sixteen or eighteen hours out of the twenty-four. So there remained only six hours to fill. . . .

Source: Albert Camus, *The Stranger*, Stuart Gilbert, trans. (New York: Vintage Books, 1946), pp. 96–99. Copyright © 1946 and renewed 1974 by Alfred A. Knopf, a division of Random House, Inc. Used by permission of Alfred A. Knopf.

1. protagonist—Who is the main character?

2. plot—What sequence of events takes place in this excerpt?

3. conflict(s)—What obstacle(s) must the protagonist overcome?

4. setting—When and where does this take place?

5. theme—Why has the author told this story: what is the author's important message or lesson? (And how might this be relevant to your life?)

6. technique—How has the author presented the story?

At this point, stop to reflect on your reaction to this exercise set. What, if anything, still confuses you about analyzing fiction?

What steps can you take to clear up any confusion you may have? Be specific.



Exercises: Poem

Last set! This one consists of a poem. Your skills should be honed a bit by now, so let's see what you can do it. Yes, this may seem harder simply because it is a poem, but don't be intimidated. (Besides, the only way you can strengthen your skills is by working with material that challenges you.) Even if you think you can't do this perfectly, give it your best effort. Don't be tempted to throw in the towel; that's sloppy practice. Deep breath! Ready? Let's roll.

This is another poem by Billy Collins, whose work you may have encountered in one of the Chapter 12 exercise sets. This poem, like the Emily Dickinson poem used earlier in this chapter as an example, deals with death. (Coach's tip: Remember to read the poem aloud.)

MY NUMBER

Is Death miles away from this house,
reaching for a widow in Cincinnati
or breathing down the neck of a lost hiker
in British Columbia?

Is he too busy making arrangements,
tampering with air brakes,
scattering cancer cells like seeds,
loosening the wooden beams of roller coasters
to bother with my hidden cottage
that visitors find so hard to find?

Or is he stepping from a black car
parked at the dark end of the lane,
shaking open the familiar cloak,
its hood raised like the head of a crow,
and removing the scythe from the trunk?

Did you have any trouble with the directions?
I will ask, as I start talking my way out of this.

Source: Billy Collins, *Sailing Around the Room Alone* (New York: Random House, 2001), p. 15.
Copyright © 1988 by Billy Collins. Reprinted by permission of the University of Arkansas Press.

1. Tell how the title fits with the poem.

2. Who or what is being discussed in the poem?

Congratulations! You're done!

What, if anything, still confuses you about analyzing a poem?

What steps can you take to clear up this confusion? Be specific.

How did you do with this chapter in general? Was it easier, the same, or harder than the preceding chapter on interpreting figurative language?

Which type of literary material do you think you need more practice on: non-fiction (such as essays or autobiographies), fiction (such as novels or short stories), or poetry? (Don't worry! I'm not going to give you any more to analyze right now . . . although there are some in the final chapter of the book.)

What other questions do you still have about analyzing literary material? Write them here:
