

05. Key Features of Prose Fiction: How to use all these Summaries

Your Study Guide gives **equal weight** to all four key features of **prose fiction** (plot, character, setting and theme), but this is **terribly misleading** as it applies to your course and the types of questions you will be asked in the examination and in your assignments.

Firstly, always remember that you will **never** be examined on an entire piece of prose fiction, unless it's **flash fiction**, so there is **no benefit** in discussing elements of plot, character, setting or theme that **do not appear** in the **exact passage** reproduced in your question – make **absolutely sure** that you **only discuss** the passage referred to in your question!

Secondly, not **all** of these features are **equally useful** in an analysis:

- **Plot** is only **peripherally useful**, at best, as it is **too broad** a topic to be used to substantiate an argument being made in a **short analysis**, such as the ones you will be asked to do. **Retelling the story** or **summarising the plot** in anything more than two or three sentences is **counter-productive**, as the only key question answered by the plot is “**what**”, as in “**what is the passage about?**” The best thing that answering this question can do for you is to **give you clues** about **likely themes** from the passage, so you would be **wasting your time** trying to provide a **detailed retelling of the plot**.
- **Characters** are the vehicles that **move plots forward**, so they can be **critical** to the **pacing** of the story. More significantly than that, they are also normally used to **highlight the themes** in a narrative, as so many themes revolve around the human condition. **Character** is a very **important** and **useful** feature of **prose fiction**, as sound character analysis can often be used to **discover central themes** and **support** an **analysis** of said themes. Of the four key features of prose fiction, **character is the second most important** – just be careful not to turn a character analysis into a retelling of the story. Focus on **what events tell us** about the **characters**, rather than how the **characters influence the events**.
- **Setting** should also be **discussed briefly**, at best, as it largely provides **clues to theme**. However, you do need to be careful here, as **recurring elements** in the setting are often a “**motif**”, which is a technique that can be used to **reinforce a theme**. In short, while **setting** is **not crucial**, it is often **more important** than **plot**.
- **Theme** is the **most important feature** of prose fiction, as it is the **primary reason** why we conduct **critical analysis**. By **understanding** the **themes** of a text, we understand what the **purpose or message of the text** is. Much of your **critical analysis** will **focus** on **identifying** the **themes** in a passage and then **explaining** to your **reader** how the **author uses language** to **create** these **themes**. This is how you explain what the passage **means to you** with proof. **Without substantiation**, you are merely **expressing an opinion**, but with **sufficient substantiation**, you are **unveiling a truth!**