

How to Study a Novel

Note Taking Strategies

Method

There isn't a single formula or a secret recipe for the successful study of literature. But to do it seriously you should be a deep and attentive reader. This means reading, then re-reading. It means making an active engagement with the book. And it means making notes.

Approach

You can read the novel quickly first, just to get an idea of the story-line. Then you will need to read it again more slowly, making notes. If you don't have time, then one careful slower reading should combine understanding and note-taking

Make notes

Make two types of notes - some written in the book itself, and others on separate pages. Those in the book are for highlighting small details as you go along. Those on separate pages are for summaries of evidence, collections of your own observations, and page references for study topics or quotations.

Notes in the book

Use a soft pencil - **not** a pen. Ink is too distracting on the page. Don't underline whole paragraphs. If something strikes you as interesting, write a brief note saying *why* or *how* it is so.

Separate notes

You will definitely remember the characters, events, and features of a novel more easily if you make notes while reading. Use separate pages for different topics. You might make a record of

- characters
- chronology of events
- major themes
- stylistic features
- narrative strategies

You may be able to determine different topics to record based upon the specifics of your assignment.

Characters

Make a note of the name, age, appearance, and their relationship to other characters in the novel. Writers usually give most background information about characters when they are first introduced into the story. Make a note of the page(s) on which this occurs. Note any special features of main characters, what other characters (or the author) think of them.

Chronology of events

A summary of each chapter will help you reconstruct the whole story long after you have read it. The summary prompts your memory of what was read. A chronology of events might also help you to unravel a complex story. It might help separate plots from sub-plots.

Major themes

These are the important underlying issues with which the novel is concerned. They are usually summarized as abstract concepts such as - marriage, education, justice, freedom, and redemption. These might only emerge slowly as the novel progresses on first reading - though they might seem much more obvious on subsequent readings.

Seeing the main underlying themes will help you to appreciate the relative importance of events. It will also help you to spot cross-references and appreciate some of the subtle effects orchestrated by the author.

Stylistic features

These are the decorative and literary hallmarks of the writer's style - which usually make an important contribution to the way the story is told. The style might be created by any number of features:

- choice of vocabulary
- imagery and metaphors
- shifts in tone and register
- use of irony and humor

Quotations

If you are writing an essay about the novel, you will need quotations from it to support your arguments. You must make a careful note of the pages on which they occur. Do these immediately while reading - otherwise tracking them down later will waste time.

Record the page number and a brief description of the subject. Write out the quotation itself if it is short enough. Don't bother writing out long quotations.

Source: <http://www.mantex.co.uk/samples/novels.htm>