

# **ACADEMIC STUDIES**

## **ENGLISH**

**Support Materials and Exercises  
for**

### **IAU - READING COMPREHENSION PART B : READING NARRATIVES**



**SUMMER 1999**

**IAU READING COMPREHENSION  
PART B : READING NARRATIVES**

**ACADEMIC ENGLISH**

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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## OBJECTIVES

Upon successful completion of this unit, the learner will be able to

1. recognize and read with understanding and enjoyment a variety of written genres.

TEACHING POINTS		Level
Journalism	Parts of newspapers (e.g. editorial, features, hard news, etc.)	7
2	Masthead	7
3	Attention getters: headlines, placement, fonts, photos, colour	7
4	Recognize fact and opinion (objective vs. subjective)	7
5	Pyramid style of writing	7
6	Writing leads (who, what, when, where, why, how)	7
7	Parts of magazines: table of contents	7
8	editorials	7
9	feature stories	7
10	columns	7
11	ads and abbreviation, etc.	7
Short Story	Narrator: (point of view) 1st, 3rd limited, 3rd omniscient	7
12		
13	Plot: introduction, rising action, climax, denouement	7
14	Character: central/minor; round /flat);methods of development	7
15	Setting/mood	7
16	Theme: central message or lesson	7
17	Also myth, legend, fable	7
Poetry	Style: traditional & modern (free & blank verse)	8&9
18		
19	Types: ballad, limerick, narrative, sonnet, other	8&9
20	Rhyme and rhythm (in general)	8&9
21	Literary devices: simile, metaphor, personification	8&9
22	alliteration, onomatopoeia	8&9
Non-fiction	define essay and prose; contrast with fiction	8
23		
24	Types: diary/journal, autobiography, biography, memoir, essay	8
Drama	Special Conventions: e.g. stage directions, dialogue/monologue,	9
25		
26	scenes and acts	9

	27	Plot, character, setting, theme in a one act play or modern play	9
Novel	28	Narrator: 1st, 3rd limited, 3rd omniscient	9
	29	Plot: introduction, rising action, climax, denouement	9
	30	Character: central, minor (round, flat)	9
	31	Setting/mood	9
	32	Theme: central message or lesson	9
Note: Continue to build the comprehension skills presented in BAU_ENG 3.1 -3.7.			

## **NOTE TO FACILITATORS AND LEARNERS:**

1. This module presents information and exercises to accompany the objectives of IAU-ENG 3.2 : READING COMPREHENSION.
2. Facilitators are free to use any support materials appropriate to their learners' needs.
3. Additional resource materials will probably be required for those wanting more information on this topic or for those needing more practice mastering certain areas. Reading materials can be drawn from any source and should be chosen to meet the individual interests and needs of each learner.
4. Alternate support materials may be appropriate. The Internet provides a wide variety of written materials, both the printed word and literature, at many reading levels.
5. Learners should participate in daily silent reading practice.
6. Learners should be encouraged to read all types of materials so they can develop their critical faculties for deciding which are examples of good writing, which deserve to be classified as literature, and which are unacceptable.
7. The purpose of reading literature is for more than investigating plot, character, setting or theme. Literature can be an invaluable tool for providing learners with writing models which they can emulate, often without conscious effort.
8. Reading widely is the basis for acquiring the broad general knowledge so important to future learning situations. It also provides a platform for discussions of life experiences, values, morality, decision-making, and many other topics useful to adult learners.
9. It is the learner's responsibility to search out additional reading materials to supplement the practice work included in this module by consulting with his/her facilitator.
10. Do **NOT** write in this module. Please make your notes and complete the exercises in your own notebooks so that other learners may also use these booklets.

## **TABLE OF CONTENTS**

READING NARRATIVES .....	1
NARRATOR .....	2
CHARACTER .....	4
PLOT .....	9
TYPES OF CONFLICT .....	10
SETTING / MOOD .....	13
THEME .....	15
NOTE TO INSTRUCTORS .....	15
FEEDBACK FORM .....	16

## Reading Narratives

Every piece of reading or writing you do can be categorized as narrative, descriptive, or expository. The two most common types are expository and narrative<sup>1</sup>. The short story, novel, and drama (the play) are all forms of narrative or story-telling; explanations, persuasive writing, journal writing, and editorials, on the other hand, are classed as expository writing. Descriptive writing is usually found within longer narrative or expository passages.

Narratives can be true stories (non-fictional) or imagined happenings (fiction). A narrative is just a story. We hear narratives every day in the form of jokes, news stories, bedtime stories, or answers to questions like, “How was your day?” When a narrative is particularly interesting or carries an important message about life and/or human behaviour, it is often written down so it can be shared with a wider audience. If the writing is good and the story effectively told, whether in the form of a novel, short story, or play, the narrative becomes *literature*. Literature is defined as “all the writings of a country or time period that are kept alive because of their excellence of style and thought”.



All forms of fiction (writing about imagined events rather than actual facts) have certain elements in common. This section, Part B: Reading Narratives, will present these common elements. The sections which follow this one will deal with the specific aspects of the short story, novel, and drama which make them different from one another.

All fictional narratives share these elements:

- **CHARACTER**
- **PLOT**
- **SETTING**

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<sup>1</sup> The third type of writing, descriptive, can be used in either expository or narrative writing.

- **THEME**
- **NARRATOR** (for short story and novel ,in particular).

## **I NARRATOR**

Every story has a **narrator**, a person who tells the story. We, the readers, see and interpret everything that happens in the story through this person's eyes. The narrator's comments and reactions influence our understanding of the narrative we are reading. Authors often consciously choose a particular **point of view** (narrator) in order to get the effect they want.

### **a. First Person Narrator**

If an author chooses to write in the **first person**, then we see everything from the point of view of "I", a character in the story who writes as an eye witness to the events. The first person narrator may be a major character, a minor one, or merely a witness to events. He/she records everything that he/she sees, hears, or experiences, so that the reader feels like the story is actually being retold by someone who was really there.

There are advantages and disadvantages in an author's use of the first person narrator. Since the character is actually a part of the story, we tend to believe what he is saying as a first-hand witness. Because the narrator appears to be directly involved in the narrative, the situations and people become more real, immediate, and believable. On the other hand, we can only know what this one character knows. If he is not present in a scene between other characters, then we have not "reporter". A writer can, however, work around this problem in various ways, such as using dialogue between other characters who report what our first-person narrator may have missed.

Some narratives have been written in the first person from the point of view of a child. This presents an unusual problem for the author; he or she has to think as a child would, in order to accurately portray events as a child would see them. One well-known example of this type of narration is the novel To Kill a Mockingbird, which you may study later.

In this novel, the narrator is a young girl, Scout, who lives in the southern United States and witnesses hatred and prejudice against Black Americans. Scout presents the events as she sees them, but she can't always offer insights or explanations into why they happen because she is a child and has not had enough life experience to realistically do this. We (the readers) are, therefore, left to puzzle things out for ourselves and interpret event, much the way a child would. Strangely, this makes the impact of the story even more powerful. In this case, the author used a child narrator to encourage readers to form his/her own interpretations of events.

One caution about the first person narrator. The reader shouldn't assume that the narrator is speaking with the author's voice, simply because the pronoun "I" is used. Think of the narrator as a guide who is leading you through the story, pointing out people, places and things you should be paying attention to. He/she may not be presenting the author's point of view. Think of the author and the narrator as separate people.

**b. Third Person Limited Narrator**

In the **third person limited** point of view, the story is told by a narrator whose view of the events of the story is limited to what can be seen through the eyes of one character in that story. As in first person narration, the narrator describes only what that one character can see, hear, or think, but by using the pronouns "he" or "she" instead of "I". The reader knows the thoughts of the character and therefore comes to know that character better than the others. As in first person point of view, we must remember that the narrator/character may not always give us an accurate picture; we are dealing with events as seen through the filter of his/her perceptions. For example, a selfish and uncaring character (narrator) will naturally portray his actions as being totally justified in his own mind, which may not be the truth. A skillful author is able to show the reader the true nature of the characters and their problems in the story while using the third person narrator to highlight the flaws in character who is telling the story.

**c. Third Person Omniscient Narrator**

The **third person omniscient** narrator is not limited in viewpoint to any one character. The word “omniscient” means all-seeing, all-knowing. It is often called the god’s eye view” of events in a narrative because this form of narrator is like a god who sits high above the action and knows everything about every character and event, including their fears, motivations, and innermost thoughts. “He”, “she” and “they” are the third person pronouns used, just as in the third person limited point of view. The narrator knows what is going on in any number of places at once, and how all the characters think and feel. He chooses what to reveal or conceal, and whose thoughts to relate, moving freely from one place to another, from one character to another.

**How To Determine Type of Narrator**

11. Look at the first page of the story. Find the pronouns. (Do not look in the dialogue for this.)
  - a. I, we = first person narrative
  - b. He, she, they = third person narrative
12. Read more carefully to determine if the story is being told through the eyes of one particular character (first person or third person limited). Try to determine who that one character is.
13. If the events are reported from more than one character’s viewpoint, then the author is using the third person omniscient point of view. If the scene shifts and the reader follows from place to place, from character to character, with no limitation, this confirms your choice.

**II CHARACTER**

The characters are the people presented in works of fiction. We know, of course, that these are not real people, but if they are portrayed skillfully by an author, they certainly will appear to be real and readers will identify with them and believe in them as if they actually existed.

How does a writer create a character? The following are some of the ways a character is developed.

## Character Development

### 1. *What a character says.*

Writers create dialogue and put words into the mouths of the characters they present. Pay attention to dialogue between characters. The words a character speaks will tell a lot about his/her personality and motivations. If the narrator is first person, the entire story is like a dialogue between the reader and the narrator, because we know every thought in his/her head. When we are reading a drama, we must rely on dialogue to reveal almost everything we need to know of the characters; there are usually few stage directions written to indicate actions of the characters.



### 2. *What a character does or how he/she behaves.*

Writers describe in words how characters act and react to events. For example, a villain may be shown as “sneering menacingly” or a young heroine as “smiling sweetly”. As the old saying goes, actions speak louder than words. Writers intentionally include descriptions of actions in their stories because they want the reader to pay attention to them and use them to interpret the characters’ personalities.



### 3. *What other characters say about him/her.*

In some stories, we can’t rely on the narrator to be truthful, but we will receive hints from what other characters say to him or about him.

4. *How other characters react to him/her.*

Much can be learned about a character by judging how those around him/her react to his/her actions and words. For example, if a character the reader sees as honest and truthful is described as “raising her eyebrows sharply at his suggestion”, it is clear that the character is behaving in a rash or unacceptable way.

**Note:** In some works of fiction, especially ones using the third person point of view, the reader can detect a certain attitude the author may have towards a character he has created. This attitude will generally not be stated outright, but can be determined through subtle, clues, such as the choice of words used to describe a character.



Characters can be classified into two main categories: central or major characters, and minor characters.

**a. Major Characters**

Major characters (also called central, round, dynamic, or main characters) are ones which are fully developed. The reader sees more than one side of their personalities. In the short story What Redburn Saw, the central character demonstrates both strengths and weaknesses, courage and cowardess. Often a major character has to fight to overcome some sort of difficulty in his life, a problem or situation he must find a solution to. The struggle may be within the character, or it may be with outside forces. [See **Conflict in Plot**]. How the character conducts this struggle reveals the type of person he is and what motivates him. Major characters often undergo some personality change between the beginning and end of the story. In other words, they grow and evolve as the action takes place.

Main characters must act like real people in order for us to believe the story. They must behave consistently. If they undergo a change, we expect to see a reason to explain that change. Like real people, round characters are never totally good or totally evil, totally weak or totally strong. It would not be a realistic portrayal of life, if they were. Real human beings are a conglomeration of various personality traits, and so believable fictional characters must also show this.

As mentioned before, do not make the assumption that the author/narrator agrees with the beliefs of his protagonist (main character). The writer may want to illustrate an important idea through a character's negative behaviours. A good example is the character of Pip, in Charles Dickens' novel Great Expectations. In this book, Pip is shown first as an innocent victimized child; then he grows up to be a snob who turns against the very people who helped him the most. Why would an author portray his main character in such an unfavourable manner? The answer becomes clear when we see that Pip suffers a horrible downfall and must undergo a total change in character before he discovers the truths of his life. It is safe to assume that the writer is

delivering a message to the reader about how to live a successful life through the trials and troubles of his central character.

**b. Minor Characters**

Minor characters (also called flat, stock, stereotype or static characters) are one-sided characters, usually built around a single quality. Think of the follow characters from children's stories: the wicked witch, the handsome prince, the evil stepmother, the beautiful princess. These characters behave predictably in all stories; they are stereotypes. They don't undergo major changes, and you could probably sum up the character in a single sentence.

Even though these characters are one-sided, do not make the mistake of thinking that they have no real role in a story. Authors create characters, even minor ones, with a purpose in mind. The flat character may be present to help or hinder the main character in some way, or to add a complication to the plot. For example, if the minor character is a selfish and immature mother, her purpose in the story may be to show how the central character grows to understand this weakness and learns not to react to it any more.

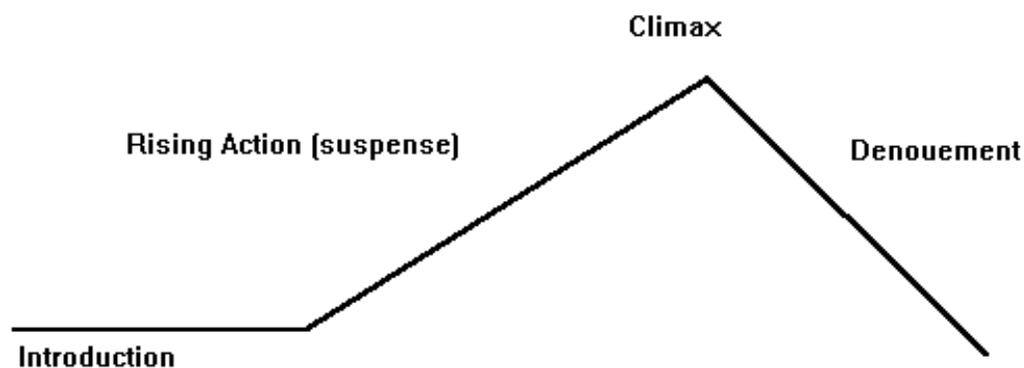
**Identifying With Characters**

You will probably enjoy reading literature more if you involve yourself in the story. One of a writer's prime goals is to make readers identify with and get "inside" the story, to imagine that the events are happening to them (or someone they know). Try to determine what your own attitudes are towards the characters and the problems they face. If you identify or sympathize with a particular character, ask yourself why. What is there about the way the character is "written" that you like? Do you think the author is steering the reader towards favouring a specific character? Do you see yourself or someone you know in the character?

Conversely, a writer can steer readers away from certain characters. If you don't like a character, try to find out why not. Which ones don't you identify with? Are they portrayed negatively? Do they have any positive traits? Why are they in the story?

### III PLOT

The term **plot** simply means the sequence of events in a narrative, the plan or design of a work of fiction. Most plots more or less follow a sequence of introduction, rising action, climax, and dénouement. You may have seen a diagram of plot structure similar to the following.



#### Introduction

In the **introduction** of a narrative, we usually learn details about the characters and the setting (where and when the story takes place). In other words, the introduction to a narrative can function in much the same way as the introduction to an expository essay. Many stories, however, plunge the reader directly into the action and we pick up details of what we need to know along the way. This kind of opening in a narrative is sometimes described as beginning *in medias res*<sup>2</sup>. This is true of short stories in particular, because the writer is working with restrictions of length.

#### Rising Action

Soon after the introduction, if there is one, the action starts to rise due to a complication, conflict, or problem. Without a conflict or problem, there is no story; such a narrative would not keep the readers' interest for long. Every

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<sup>2</sup> In medias res.....means in the middle of things

complication or conflict you can imagine can be placed in one the following categories. Conflict or complications are introduced in the rising action section of the plot and are used by the author to help create suspenseful situations for the reader. As the conflict develops, the reader wonders how the problem will be resolved and what the outcome will be.

### Types of Conflict

1. **Man versus man<sup>3</sup>:** One person against another person or people. (Example: one person struggling with another either physically or in a battle of wits.)
2. **Man versus society.** One person against society. (Example: a law-breaker who is violating the rules or moral codes made by society.)
3. **Man versus himself.** One person struggling within him/herself. (Example: a character struggling with internal conflicts - his conscience, his sense of right and wrong, trying to make a difficult decision.)
4. **Man versus nature.** One person against nature. (Example: survival in the outdoors. Canadian short stories and novels portray our constant battle against the elements - storms at sea, Arctic snowstorms, Prairie droughts, freezing temperatures everywhere.)

Two other devices are often used to create rising action in a narrative.

#### **Foreshadowing:**

Hints/clues given to the reader about something that will happen in the future.

#### **Suspense:**

The feeling of anticipation readers experience when they know an event is about to take place. Suspense keeps us guessing and eager to know what happens next.

#### **Climax**

When the rising action is at its highest point, the **climax**, we finally learn the result(s) of any conflicts, or receive a surprise. The mystery, if there is one, is

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<sup>3</sup> Man is used here to denote mankind, human beings...both genders are included.

now revealed to the reader. A major change in attitude may occur in a central character. Sometimes the story ends abruptly at the climax. We don't learn more - we are left hanging in mid-air, with questions unanswered. These are called **open-ended plots**.

The climax is an important point in the plot structure, and it is often the key to understanding a story. You should always locate the climax of a work and ask yourself some questions about it, such as whether the mystery has been solved to your satisfaction, and whether the characters have been affected in a negative or positive way by this climactic event. What does the climax mean to the story as a whole?

Short stories, again because of time/length restrictions, often begin close to the climax, with very little detail and explanation of what has gone before. A device, called **flashback**, can be used by the author to fill in details about what has happened before the beginning of the story. For example, a character may remember incidents from his/her past and tell them to another character. In the case of a first-person narrator, we can read the thoughts of the character.

At times, there is nothing to indicate to the reader that the author has shifted the plot to the past; at times like these, readers have to read carefully to pick up these clues. We are familiar with flashbacks in movies, where the scene fades to the past, the music becomes faint, and the action seems blurry. Sometimes the character is actually "thinking" the past scenes in his/her mind.

### **Dénouement**

If the story continues after the climax, there is usually a dénouement which literally means "untying the knots". All the reader's questions are answered, the mysteries are solved, and the fate of each character described. Dénouement is also called "falling action". The suspense is over; the ending feels satisfying. In the short story, the dénouement can be as brief as a few sentences while in a novel it can last for several pages.

**Beginnings and Endings** When reading literature, pay close attention to beginnings and endings of stories. Many key points of the story are found there. Introductions often need to be read several times because information which the reader found unimportant at first sight may provide vital clues to the plot. Endings often contain the main point (theme) of the story, so never rush through the dénouement.



## IV SETTING/MOOD (ATMOSPHERE)

**Setting** in a narrative always involves two things: time and place. In some stories, the setting is plainly stated for the reader; in others, we have to use clues to make an educated guess about the time/or place of the story.

### Time

Time can refer to “time of day” or “historical period”.

Try to determine the time period during which the narrative takes place, which may be different from the time in which the author lived. If there is a note about the author’s life, read it and then ask yourself if the story seems to occur within the period of the author’s lifetime. Knowing a bit of historical background usually helps in understanding the story; it can explain, for example, why characters behave in a certain way. Morals and attitudes change with the times. In contrast, science fiction stories are set in the future; therefore, the author is totally free to create details from his/her imagination.

What can you guess about the “time” in a short story that opens like this.

*Ada lit the lamps and stoked the stove against the icy rivers of cold air that would soon cut across the tiny room.*

A short story usually covers a short period of time, such as hours or days. A novel can cover a time span of many years and generations.

### Place

The place where a story is set may be clearly established. If not, you have to use clues in the writing to determine where the action is taking place. The action may be confined to one place or involve many places. In drama, there is usually a limitation to one or two places because there is the restriction of a stage to consider. This limited space to work with leads to creative ideas for changing scenes, and demands more of our imagination as the reader/viewer.

When a writer uses details of a certain geographic area to make the story sound authentic, he/she is using **local colour**. Such details include dialect (the accent or manner of speaking in a particular region); clothing; food; landscape; ways of thinking and feeling (beliefs); customs; pastimes; or professions. The locale (place) is vital in these stories, because we are all shaped by our surroundings in both good and bad ways. We are products of era (time) we live in.

There is a setting in every story, and it may or may not play a significant role in the story. If the setting isn't important, then it is often implied (not directly stated) through details. To suggest a city, there would be details like traffic noise, sirens, and descriptions of skyscrapers. A rural scene would involve lots of green space, rivers, and lakes, or peace and quiet. If it is important to know that a story takes place in New York City or rural Saskatchewan, it is more likely to be stated directly. The place, in these cases, may play a vital role in the development of narration or the lives of the characters.

### **Mood/Atmosphere**

The **mood** of a story is the feeling or atmosphere that the reader senses; it is created from many details of setting, character, and plot. Although it isn't often easy to pinpoint *how* atmosphere is created, we all have a general sense of the tone of a story. We say it's... happy or sad, peaceful or disturbing, frightening, suspenseful, gloomy, uplifting. The atmosphere may play a powerful role in the story, to the extent that it can still be felt after the story is finished.

The places where stories are set can create atmosphere. Examples of this are novels such as Wuthering Heights and The Return of the Native, where the moors - the bleak and harsh gorges and stretches of land in parts of England - are so powerful a presence that they shape the lives of the characters. The gloomy atmosphere in these novels is hard to escape, for the reader as well as the characters.

## V **THEME**

The **theme** is the lesson or moral the reader draws from a story. The writer may state this message directly, but more often the theme is implicit. That means that the reader must search for the theme or draw his/her own conclusions by thinking about all the elements of the story (plot, character, conflict, etc.). A good writer makes this easy for a reader by communicating his understanding of human nature and by making the story so powerful that the reader is involved and interested in the characters and what happens to them. Often, the reader sees something clearly, while a character in the story remains unaware of it.

The theme is not a summary of the events of a story, but rather a statement of what the story was about, such as “Honesty is the best policy”, anger is a destructive emotion, sacrifice is a noble gift, etc. The theme is often a comment or lesson on human problems and solutions that remain effective throughout time.

Narratives do not always have to have a theme. Some short stories are written just to be entertaining. Novels are much longer, so it is rare that a novel will not have a message or theme within it.

### **NOTE TO INSTRUCTORS**

Throughout the following units in this section on reading comprehension, there are suggested stories, novels, and plays. These suggestions are guidelines only; each instructor (or learner) probably has favourite pieces of literature to use. Because of copyright laws, it is much simpler for each instructor to obtain materials than it is for the writer of these units to obtain permission to copy individual short stories, novels or plays and include them in these modules. It also makes the units shorter and less intimidating for learners.

Almost any short stories, novels, or plays can be used to illustrate the points in the following sections. Try to pick examples that match the individual interests and reading levels of each student.

## **FEEDBACK PROCESS**

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For feedback, please forward your comments to:

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  - insufficient explanations;
  - insufficient examples;
  - ambiguity or wordiness of text;
  - relevancy of the provided examples;
  - others...

<b>Page number</b>	<b>Nature of the problem</b>	<b>Proposed solution (include your text if possible)</b>

