

How to Analyse a Short Story for the Selective Test

(Reading Comprehension Focus)

A comprehensive guide to narrative analysis for Australian Selective School Examinations



Aligned with the Australian curriculum

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Introduction

Analysing short stories is a key skill in the Selective Test's reading comprehension section. Understanding how to break down a narrative, interpret its features, and respond critically will not only help you excel in the test, but also develop lifelong literacy skills.

- What is narrative analysis?
- Why is it important for the Selective Test?
- What skills will you develop by mastering story analysis?

Step-by-Step Guide to Analysing a Short Story

1. Understand the Structure of a Narrative

Most short stories follow a general structure:

1. Orientation (introduction to setting and characters)
2. Complication (conflict or problem arises)
3. Climax (turning point of greatest tension)
4. Resolution (conclusion or solving of the problem)

Example:

Identify which part of the narrative this excerpt belongs to:

"The sky darkened as Maya raced towards the old pier, her heart pounding with each step."

Climax – the action is at its most intense, creating suspense.

Practice (Identify the Narrative Section):

“Once upon a time, in a sleepy village, lived a clever fox.”

“Suddenly, the river burst its banks, flooding the fields.”

“Peace returned to the valley, and the people cheered.”

“As Tom struggled with the lock, he remembered his grandfather’s advice.”

“Rain lashed the windows as Anna faced her fears.”

“With the puzzle solved, calm settled over the house.”

“Marcus woke early and packed his bag for school.”

“She found herself trapped in the cave.”

“After the celebration, they promised to remember the lesson.”

“The door creaked open to reveal an empty room.”

2. Recognise Literary Devices and Techniques

Writers use a variety of techniques to enhance their stories. Being able to detect these devices will deepen your ability to analyse narratives.

- **Simile** – comparing two things using ‘like’ or ‘as’
- **Metaphor** – saying something is something else
- **Personification** – giving objects or animals human qualities
- **Alliteration** – repetition of initial consonant sounds
- **Hyperbole** – exaggerated statements
- **Onomatopoeia** – words that imitate sounds

Example:

“The trees danced in the wind.”

Personification – trees are given the human ability to ‘dance’.

Practice (Identify the Literary Device):

“The thunder roared angrily in the night.”

“As sly as a fox, he tiptoed past the door.”

“His backpack weighed a tonne after school.”

“The cold crept into the house.”

“She shimmered like a star on stage.”

“Peter picked a peck of pickled peppers.”

“The kettle hissed as the water boiled.”

“My heart leapt out of my chest.”

“Dawn painted the sky with colours.”

“Crash! The vase shattered on the floor.”

3. Analyse Character and Motivation

Understanding what motivates characters helps you interpret their actions and the progression of the story. Consider:

- What does the character want?
- What obstacles stand in their way?
- How do their actions change throughout the story?

Example:

“Jamie hesitated, his fingers trembling over the light switch. He longed to overcome his fear of the dark.”

Jamie's motivation is to conquer his fear, but his emotions create an obstacle.

Practice (Describe the Motivation):

“Ella practised every evening, hoping to win the music competition.”

“Ben lied to his teacher to protect his friend.”

“Marie refused to apologise, determined to prove her innocence.”

“Jordan raised his hand despite his nervousness.”

“Sarah helped the new student find her classroom.”

“Leo searched for his lost dog in the rain.”

“Chloe stayed up late to finish her project.”

“Zac hid the broken vase behind the curtains.”

“Sophie apologised even though it wasn't her fault.”

“Oliver volunteered at the animal shelter each weekend.”

4. Interpret Setting and Atmosphere

The setting often shapes the mood and influences the events in a story. Look for descriptive language that creates a vivid sense of place.

- Time (era, time of day)
- Place (country, city, countryside, type of building)
- Atmosphere (how the setting feels – safe, eerie, busy, lonely, etc.)

Example:

"The abandoned hospital loomed in the fog, its windows dark and empty."

Setting: an abandoned hospital in fog. Atmosphere: eerie, mysterious.

Practice (Describe the Atmosphere):

"Sunlight streamed through the classroom windows."

"The old playground was silent under the moonlight."

"Rain battered the tiny seaside cottage."

"Children's laughter echoed in the bustling market."

"Thunder rumbled above the empty football pitch."

"The library was quiet, except for the rustle of pages."

"Fireworks burst above the crowded park."

"Fog rolled across the deserted street."

"The kitchen smelled of fresh bread and coffee."

"Leaves danced on the crisp autumn wind."

5. Identify Themes and Messages

Themes are the deeper ideas or messages behind a story. Ask yourself: What does the author want readers to think or feel?

- Friendship
- Courage
- Honesty
- Perseverance
- Change and Growth
- Kindness

Example:

"Despite her fear, Mia stood up for what was right."

Theme: Courage; the message is to be brave in the face of fear.

Practice (Suggest a Possible Theme):

"Sam returned the lost wallet to its owner."

"Lina worked hard and never gave up, even when it was difficult."

“Jake forgave his brother’s mistakes.”

“The team supported each other during the final match.”

“Elena faced her fear of heights.”

“Harvey shared his lunch with a new friend.”

“Sandy admitted to breaking the window.”

“Alex learnt that helping others is its own reward.”

“Maria found the courage to try something new.”

“Tom realised the value of telling the truth.”

Key Reading Comprehension Strategies

1. **Skim the passage** to get a general sense before reading questions.
2. **Highlight or underline** key words for characters, settings, and events.
3. Break questions down into smaller parts and look for evidence in the text for each answer.
4. Reread tricky sections to clarify what is happening and why.
5. Predict what might happen next or why a character makes a certain choice.
6. Always check your answers by referring back to the text.

Practice (Apply Strategies):

Choose a short story and:

- Skim the text and write the main idea in one sentence (try this for at least 3 stories)
- List each character and write one word to describe them (do for at least 2 stories)
- Identify at least 2 literary devices in each story you read (10 examples)

Sample Analysis

Read the following short story excerpt:

Excerpt:

The first raindrops splashed onto the dry earth as Lily raced home. She hugged her coat tighter, her mind swirling with fear and excitement. The storm grew louder, echoing her hopes for a fresh start.

- **Narrative structure:** Complication – a storm is coming, creating tension for the main character.
- **Literary device:** Personification – “the storm grew louder, echoing her hopes” gives the storm emotions.
- **Character motivation:** Lily is hurrying home, possibly to escape the storm or for emotional reasons.

- **Setting and atmosphere:** Wet, stormy weather; creates suspense and urgency.
- **Theme:** New beginnings; facing challenges brings opportunities for growth.

Practice (Short Story Analysis):

Passage 1: *Tom watched the last bus leave as he realised he was stranded. He clenched his fists, determined to find a way home.*

- What is Tom's motivation?
- How does the author show Tom's feelings?
- What is the atmosphere of the scene?
- Suggest a theme for this passage.

Passage 2: *Bright balloons floated above the crowd, laughter ringing through the sunny park. For the first time all week, Zoe smiled.*

- What clues show Zoe's mood?
- How does the setting influence the mood?
- Identify one literary device in this passage.
- What might be the theme?

Passage 3: *The empty classroom echoed with Liam's footsteps. He took a deep breath before walking to the front.*

- What emotion does Liam feel?
- What words create atmosphere?
- What could the main theme be?

Passage 4: *Sandra bit her lip, staring at her unfinished homework as the clock ticked ever closer to midnight.*

- What conflict does Sandra face?
- How does the author build tension?
- Identify the setting.
- Suggest a theme from this passage.

Passage 5: *The narrow alley was dark and slick after rain. A stray cat darted across Kai's path, making him jump.*

- Describe the setting and atmosphere.
- What feeling does Kai experience?
- Suggest a literary device found here.

Passage 6: *As Mia opened the old diary, yellowed pages crackled under her fingers and secrets from the past came alive.*

- What gives the sense of time/place?
- What is Mia's motivation?
- Find a metaphor or simile.

Passage 7: *"I promise I'll never let you down," said Josh as he helped his sister up the steps.*

- What value is shown in this passage?

- What is Josh's motivation?
- How does dialogue help reveal character?

Passage 8: *A single candle flickered in the silent room while Ava wrote her last goodbye letter.*

- Identify and describe the mood.
- What does the candle symbolise?
- What theme can you find here?

Passage 9: *Loud applause filled the theatre as Lucy took her bow, pride and relief washing over her like a gentle tide.*

- What imagery is used?
- Describe Lucy's emotional journey.
- Find a literary device.

Passage 10: *Despite the pouring rain, Adam offered his umbrella to the elderly man, sharing a smile as they walked together.*

- What theme is shown in this passage?
- How does the setting affect the event?
- How does the author show kindness without using the word?

Top Tips for Short Story Analysis in the Selective Test

- Always refer back to the text to support your answers.
- Explain your reasoning clearly. Use evidence and examples from the story.
- Look for patterns, repeated words or ideas, and changes in mood or action.
- Practise analysing a variety of short stories to become familiar with different styles and themes.
- Keep calm in the exam. Remember, your goal is to show understanding, not just to guess.