What to Look for in Literature
- Author's Use of Words
- Author's Use of Figurative Language
- Author's Tone
- Traits of Character
- Author's Theme
- Author's Intent

The EVOKER System
- Explore
- Vocabulary
- Oral Reading
- Key Ideas and Themes
- Evaluate
- Recapitulate

EVOKER Demonstrated
- All Six Steps
Textbooks aren’t literature and literature isn’t text—few people would dispute that. So why read *Sons and Lovers* as though it were *Statistics and Logic*? Each of the two types of writing marches to the beat of a different drummer. This chapter deals with

- What to Look For in Literature
- Using the EVOKER System for Reading Imaginative Prose

There are two worlds: the world that we can measure with line and rule, and the world we feel with our hearts and imagination.

**Leigh Hunt** (1784–1859), British writer and editor of the *Examiner*
Reading literature (imaginative prose) is very much like looking at a painting. Neither reader nor viewer will learn much if he or she doesn’t know what to look for.

What to Look For in Literature

As you read literature, notice how the author uses words, figurative language, tone, and characters to present his or her stories, ideas, and themes.

**Author’s Use of Words**

Observe closely the way an author uses words to make a story interesting. The author may want to achieve a certain effect by choosing and arranging words in a particular way, perhaps to create a vivid picture or image, or to emphasize a point with a simple or complex sentence. For example, your idea of a person could be far different depending on whether the author says the man is fat or stout, remarkable or odd, different or eccentric and whether he walks or struts.

Words also help to reveal an author’s style. In sum, when you understand what an author does with words, and how the author does it, your enjoyment of the writing is bound to increase.

**Author’s Use of Figurative Language**

*Figures of speech* are words used in an imaginative sense to emphasize or clarify statements that otherwise would be difficult to visualize and remember. For example, “The bargain-hungry shoppers charged into the store like a herd of elephants” stirs the imagination. You can visualize the action better than if the writer had said, “The shoppers entered noisily.”

**Author’s Tone**

Sometimes words say one thing but mean another. To find out what a writer means, you must know whether the writer is being serious, satiric, sarcastic, ironic, or playful. In many instances, if you miss the tone, you’ll miss the intent. A classic example of a piece of writing that means something quite different from what it says is Jonathan Swift’s essay “A Modest Proposal.” Written in 1729, the “proposal” suggested that the desperate situation of the Irish people could be remedied by promoting a project for butchering and marketing surplus children as delicacies for the table, “very proper for landlords, who, as they have already devoured most of the parents, seem to have the best titles to the children.” To take the essay literally, as a hideous and inhuman proposal, is of course to miss the entire point: Swift’s savage indignation on behalf of the Irish
people, his hatred of injustice and inhumanity. Understanding that the tone is bitterly satiric, we can appreciate this essay as a great humane statement intended to shock readers into awareness of an intolerable condition.

How do you know when to take a selection literally? There is no definite and easy way to tell. But you will acquire sensitivity to attitude, intent, and tone through reading and analyzing. Start with examples identified for you as satirical, ironic, humorous, and so on, and look for words and phrases that provide clues. With practice, you will develop an alert sense for what an author means beyond what he or she says.

**Traits of Character**
Authors want their characters to be identified as real people rather than as storybook types or caricatures. Most authors create characters gradually, attributing to them a wide range of thoughts, emotions, and actions. From these materials, you build the characters in your own mind. To distinguish one character from another on the basis of traits such as pride, jealousy, shrewdness, and snobbishness, you should watch for the distinctive words and actions of each character.

**Author’s Theme**
Most enduring literature presents a theme or series of themes. Through their stories and characters, authors tell you what they believe and how they feel about life, humankind, truth, morality, hypocrisy, tolerance, suffering, death, love—issues of central concern to us all. In works of imaginative literature, you can see and perhaps better understand human motivation and behavior and their consequences.

**Author’s Intent**
As you read, keep in mind these two questions: “Why did the author write this story?” and “What did he or she try to accomplish?” Considering these questions can lead you to see the author’s purpose for writing the story you’re reading, which in turn can further your understanding of the story’s content, meaning, and implications.

**Using the EVOKER System**
A systematic approach to reading a novel takes some of the guesswork out of reading and lays a firm foundation for your continued development in reading and thinking. The EVOKER system provides you with a step-by-step procedure for approaching a piece of imaginative prose. The name is a mnemonic for
Explore, Vocabulary, Oral Reading, Key Ideas and Themes, Evaluate, and Recapitulate. The steps are as follows:

1. Explore: Read silently and quickly through the entire selection without stopping to reread a portion that you perhaps did not fully understand. By pressing on, you will frequently clarify some obscure points. And by reading the entire selection without stopping, you will gain a feeling for the whole.

2. Vocabulary: Do not stop to look up unfamiliar words. By continuing to read, you may come across a familiar synonym. Instead, as you read, quickly underline any word that is not entirely clear to you. After you have finished the selection, look up in the dictionary definitions of words whose meanings are still vague. As you discover the meaning of each word, fit it into the context by rereading the entire paragraph in which it appears. By doing so, you will preserve the unity of the paragraph.

3. Oral Reading: Look over the selection a second time, reading portions aloud using proper intonation (expression). Reading the passage aloud not only aids comprehension but also communicates to you the stress, rhythm, and power of words and word sequences.

4. Key Ideas and Themes: During both the silent and the oral reading in the previous two steps, you will have perceived and approximately located various key ideas. Now, in this step, locate these key ideas more precisely and underline them. This procedure will help make the key ideas stand out so you can better see and understand the author’s plan of organization. The sum of these key ideas should help you formulate a general analysis of the author’s main and subsidiary themes.

5. Evaluate: Evaluate, in context, the keywords, figurative language, and ideas to see how they contribute to the theme or themes. Notice, too, how the keywords develop the shades of meaning, the mood, and the tone of the selection. This detailed analysis extracts the fullest meaning of every important word, phrase, and sentence.

6. Recapitulate: Having completed all these steps, you are now ready, like someone who has just fitted the last piece of a jigsaw puzzle in place, to draw back and look at the whole picture—to read the entire selection or episode slowly and completely, with insight and understanding.

**EVOKER Demonstrated**

The following excerpt is from D. H. Lawrence’s *Sons and Lovers*, which is often assigned in English courses. Notice how each of the six steps is applied to the two short paragraphs; notice, too, how much information is gained from these
fifty-two words. When you are preparing to discuss an assigned novel or short story in class, this is the way to prepare for it.

Before the younger man knew where he was he was staggering backwards from a blow across the face.

The whole night went black. He tore off his overcoat and coat, dodging a blow, and flung the garments over Dawes. The latter swore savagely. Morel, in his shirtsleeves, was now alert and furious.

Now, to apply the EVOKER close-reading system to the above passage, we take the following steps:

1. We read the passage silently.
2. We make sure that all words are correctly understood. For instance, we might look up the word staggering to understand its full meaning.
3. In the oral reading of the selection we unmistakably pick up the hissing sound made by the s’s in “swore savagely.”
4. We look for the author’s theme or intention. In this selection the important aspect is the author’s intention—to describe, in detail, a fight between two men. Next, we look for the organizational pattern—specifically, in order to find and mark off the steps taken by the author to achieve his purpose. The main steps or divisions are as follows: The author plunges the reader into the action—two men fighting; then the author describes the setting while keeping the fighting active—the time is night; next, he gives a physical description of the men; and, finally, he describes the mental states of both men.
5. By using the technique of detailed analysis to differentiate among shades of meaning, we find the following:

The first sentence reveals that the younger man received an unexpected blow from the older man. We know that the blow was a hard one because the word staggered was used. Here staggered means the movement of legs not only to keep one’s balance but also to keep from sinking to the ground because of the physical shock of the blow affecting the senses.

In the second sentence the author tells much with only a few words. The word black reveals to us not only that it is night but also that the blow to the younger man was almost a knockout.

The third sentence supplies information that helps the reader fill in the physical details more completely; at the same time, the words overcoat and coat indicate that it is quite cold.

Then, with the phrase dodging a blow, the author realistically keeps the fighting going while telling about the coats. In the same sentence, the words flung 2

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2“Reading Imaginative Prose: The EVOKER System.” Reprinted by permission of The College Reading Association.
Supplement: Specialized Skills

Authors choose their words carefully to ensure that they convey exact shades of meaning and emphasis. The words skinny and svelte, for example, may be considered synonyms, but their effect on the reader can be entirely different. Your job as reader is to determine the author's purpose behind his or her word choice.

A good basis for reading any work of literature is the question "Why did the author write this story?" When you begin to understand the author's primary intent, then you will gradually see the reasons for his or her choice of words, characters, and plot.

The EVOKER system was designed to give you a procedure for comprehending and evaluating a piece of literature.

It is best to keep on reading. It is vital that you preserve the unity of each paragraph as you read literature. Unfamiliar words are often defined through context as you read on. If not, you can look them up in the dictionary after your first, uninterrupted reading.
What is the purpose of reading a passage aloud?

Oral reading adds another dimension to your understanding of literature. There is no better way to appreciate the rhythm, emphasis, and sonority of literature than by reading it aloud.

What is the value of locating a passage’s key ideas?

Understanding the overall intent of an author’s work is like doing a jigsaw puzzle. In this case, the key ideas are the individual pieces. As is not the case with a standard puzzle, however, you have to locate the pieces before you can use them. Once you find the key ideas, you can fit them together into the big picture—the author’s intent or theme.

**HAVE YOU MISSED SOMETHING?**

**SENTENCE COMPLETION**

Complete the following sentences with one of the three words or phrases listed below each sentence.

1. Authors want their characters identified as ________________.
   - storybook types
   - real people
   - extreme personalities
2. The tone of a selection is developed by ________________.
   - keywords
   - actions of characters
   - physical setting
3. The purpose of the EVOKER system is to foster ________________.
   - enjoyment
   - awareness
   - experimentation

**MATCHING**

In each blank space in the left column, write the letter preceding the phrase in the right column that matches the left item best.

1. Explore
2. Vocabulary
3. Oral reading
4. Key ideas
5. Evaluate
6. Recapitulate
   a. Use intonation to help comprehension
   b. Draw back and look at the whole picture
   c. Do it quickly and without stopping
   d. Use content as a powerful tool
   e. Underline any that you have ascertained
   f. Mark it now but look it up later

**TRUE-FALSE**

Write T beside the true statements and F beside the false statements.

1. The meaning of a printed page is immediately apparent.
2. In literature, words say what they mean.
3. Figures of speech can help clarify a hard-to-remember statement.
Choose the word or phrase that completes each sentence most accurately, and circle the letter that precedes it.

1. Reading literature is like examining a
   a. painting.
   b. patient.
   c. prism.
   d. plant.

2. An author's choice of words helps to reveal his or her
   a. style.
   b. contemporaries.
   c. intelligence.
   d. research.

3. Figures of speech can make a statement easier to
   a. visualize.
   b. understand.
   c. remember.
   d. all the above.

4. Missing a passage's tone can mean missing
   a. its rhythm.
   b. its intent.
   c. its punctuation.
   d. none of the above.

5. Most enduring literature has at least one
   a. satirical idea.
   b. theme.
   c. conclusion.
   d. dialogue.

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_____ 4. You can’t always be sure whether to take a passage literally.
_____ 5. The EVOKER name is a mnemonic device.
Chapter D: Studying Literature

**SHORT ANSWER**

Supply a brief answer for each of the following items.

1. How do you decide whether a writing selection should be taken literally?
2. Why is a theme so important in an author's work?
3. What is the value of EVOKER's Recapitulate step?
4. Distinguish between an author's tone and an author's intent.

**VOCABULARY BUILDING**

Make a light check mark (✓) alongside one of the three words (choices) that most nearly expresses the meaning of the italicized word in the phrases that are in the left-hand column.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>intolerable condition</td>
<td>unendurable</td>
<td>reasonable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>take a selection literally</td>
<td>carelessly</td>
<td>figuratively</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>identified as satirical</td>
<td>reality</td>
<td>ironical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>book types or caricatures</td>
<td>exaggerations</td>
<td>characters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>obscure points</td>
<td>prominent</td>
<td>apparent</td>
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<tr>
<td>dissident shareholders</td>
<td>dissatisfied</td>
<td>similar</td>
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<tr>
<td>arcane business</td>
<td>understood</td>
<td>open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dissidents truly mollified</td>
<td>appeased</td>
<td>agitated</td>
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<tr>
<td>strange genetic mutation</td>
<td>outcome</td>
<td>change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>insidious personality changes</td>
<td>obvious</td>
<td>shady</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>it looks haphazard</td>
<td>deliberate</td>
<td>intentional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>at a staid pace</td>
<td>jaunty</td>
<td>dignified</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>with astonishing alacrity</td>
<td>reluctance</td>
<td>nimbleness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>conservative and insular</td>
<td>narrow</td>
<td>liberal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>an entrepreneurial company</td>
<td>traditional</td>
<td>established</td>
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</table>
### D-11

**Supplement: Specialized Skills**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>16. it will be <em>relentless</em></td>
<td>stern</td>
<td>compromising</td>
<td>compassionate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. the more <em>viable</em> tool</td>
<td>vivid</td>
<td>thoughtful</td>
<td>workable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. the <em>cadre</em> of directors</td>
<td>group</td>
<td>quality</td>
<td>experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. <em>complementing</em> their businesses</td>
<td>recognizing</td>
<td>applauding</td>
<td>dovetailing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. many <em>culinary</em> classes</td>
<td>fashion</td>
<td>cooking</td>
<td>crafts</td>
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</tbody>
</table>