**Elements of a Short Story**

**What Is a Short Story?**

A short story is a work of short, narrative prose that is usually centered around one single event. It is limited in scope and has an introduction, body and conclusion. Although a short story has much in common with a novel, it is written with much greater precision. Any time you are asked to write an essay that is based on a piece of fiction, the following guide and questions may help you.

Once you examine these narrative elements, you want to look for PATTERNS, or MOTIFS, in the work.  Pay attention to words & images that are related

**Setting**

Setting is a description of where and when the story takes place. In a short story there are fewer settings compared to a novel. The time is more limited. Ask yourself the following questions:

* How is the setting created? Consider geography, weather, time of day, social conditions, etc.
* What role does setting play in the story? Is it an important part of the plot or theme? Or is it just a backdrop against which the action takes place?
* Does the setting change? If so, how?

Study the time period, which is also part of the setting, and ask yourself the following:

* When was the story written?
* Does it take place in the present, the past, or the future?
* How does the time period affect the language, atmosphere or social circumstances of the short story?

**Characterization**

Characterization deals with how the characters in the story are described. In short stories there are usually fewer characters compared to a novel. They usually focus on one central character or protagonist. Ask yourself the following:

* Who is the main character?
* Who or what is the antagonist?
* Are the main character and other characters described through dialogue – by the way they speak (dialect or slang for instance)?
* Has the author described the characters by physical appearance, thoughts and feelings, and interaction (the way they act towards others)?
* Are they static characters who do not change?
* Are they dynamic characters who change?
* What type of characters are they? What qualities stand out? Are they stereotypes?
* Are the characters believable?
* Do the characters symbolize something?

**Plot and Structure**

The plot is the main sequence of events that make up the story. In short stories the plot is usually centered around one experience or significant moment. Consider the following questions:

* What is the most important event?
* How is the plot structured? Is it linear, chronological or does it move around?
* Is the plot believable?

**CONFLICT:**  Conflict or tension is usually the heart of the short story and is related to the main character. In a short story there is usually one main struggle.

* How would you describe the main conflict?
* Is it an internal conflict within the character?
* Is it an external conflict caused by the surroundings or environment the main character finds himself/herself in?

**CLIMAX:**  The climax is the point of greatest tension or intensity in the short story. It can also be the point where events take a major turn as the story races towards its conclusion.

* When does the climax take place?

**RESOLUTION**:  The resolution is the end of the story. It focuses on how the conflict is ultimately resolved.

* Are the closing sentences significant? How does the end relate or connect to the opening?

**Narrator and Point of View**

The narrator is the person telling the story.  Consider this question: Are the narrator and the main character the same?

By point of view we mean from whose eyes the story is being told. Short stories tend to be told through one character’s point of view. The following are important questions to consider:

* Who is the narrator or speaker in the story?
* Does the author speak through the main character?
* Is the story written in the first person “I” point of view?
* Is the story written in a detached third person “he/she” point of view?
* Is there an “all-knowing” third person who can reveal what all the characters are thinking and doing at all times and in all places?
* Is the narrator trustworthy?

**Style**

The author’s style has to do with the his or her vocabulary, use of imagery, tone, or the feeling of the story. It has to do with the author’s attitude toward the subject. In some short stories the tone can be ironic, humorous, cold, or dramatic.

* Is the author’s language full of figurative language: metaphors, symbols, personification, etc.?
* What images are used?
* What is the tone or mood of the story?

**Theme**

The theme is built on a topic, such as death, hope, the American dream, etc. and how the topic affects the human condition, society, or life.  As a reader, focus on what the story is **revealing** about the topic.  The theme should be expressed as a statement, a general observation about human nature.

***To help you write a thematic statement, consider the following:***

* What is the story about – its general topic(s) (IE:  money, wealth, death, etc.)?
* How is the topic developed? (Consider how characters change, symbols, climax, etc.)
* Do you notice any patterns in imagery, diction, etc.?
* Does the title have any significance?
* Does the narrator or character include any statement(s) that reveals a theme or observation?

***What a theme is NOT:***

* a word or phrase (topic or subject)
* a command
* a judgment

To help you construct the thematic statement, make a list of important images, topics, etc. found in the text.  Try to create a statement that includes the words in your list.