

Elements of the Novel

A novel is a prose narrative work which is long enough to be printed as an entire book. The novel is usually divided into smaller portions, called chapters. (A short story, in contrast, is a narrative prose work which is short enough to be read in one sitting, and is usually published in a magazine or anthology.) Novels and short stories share various plot elements. You have probably encountered these elements in previous English courses. We'll begin with a review of them.

1. **Setting:** The background in which the story takes place. There are several aspects to setting:

(a) *Place:* This is the geographical location of the story. Since novels are lengthy, the story may move from one place to another. When asked to describe the setting, you may give the general geographical location (e.g., in a novel which takes place in numerous locations around Italy, you may mention only the country) or you may describe several specific locations.

(b) *Time:* First, this refers to the period of history, if the story is set in the past. If the story could happen now or at some recent unspecified time, we say that it is "contemporary." If it is a science fiction story, it may be set in the future. When describing setting, be as specific as the author is. Novels usually span (take place over) a much longer period of time than short stories, so you may need to say that a novel's setting in time is from 1937 to 1956. When describing the setting of a portion of the novel, you may be able to specify the season, month, and even time of day.

(c) *Climate/Weather:* This is an aspect of setting which is often forgotten, but it can be important to the novel. If the story begins in the midst of a hurricane, it is significant to the story.

(d) *Lifestyle:* This refers to the daily life of the characters. If a story takes place in a particular historical period, the lifestyle of the characters (e.g., whether they are poor farmers or residents of the court) is part of the setting.

2. **Atmosphere:** The mood or feeling of the story, the emotional quality that the story gives to the reader. This is usually evoked by the setting and, like the setting, may change throughout the novel. You may say that a novel opens with a mysterious atmosphere, a gloomy atmosphere, a light, carefree atmosphere, etc.

3. **Characters:** the people, animal, robots, etc., who take part in the action of the story.

4. **Conflict:** the struggle between opposing forces in the story. Conflict provides interest and suspense. There are various types of conflict, which can usually be categorized as one of the following:

- (a) a character struggling against nature
- (b) a struggle between two or more characters
- (c) a struggle between the main character and some aspect of society
- (d) a struggle of opposing forces within one character

The reader usually follows the actions of one main character throughout the novel; this character is referred to as the **protagonist**. The force with which the protagonist is in conflict is called the **antagonist**. In the case of the fourth type of conflict listed, the antagonist would be another internal force within the protagonist, e.g., self-doubt.

5. **Plot:** The storyline; the ordered arrangement of incidents in a story. Plot arises out of the conflict in the story, which builds to a climax.

6. **Theme:** the central idea in the story or novel. It can usually be expressed in a short statement about human nature, life, or the universe.

The following is a summary of these major elements:

- *Setting is the "where" and "when" of the story or novel.*
- *Characters are the "who."*
- *Conflict is the "what." (What is the problem?)*
- *Plot is the "how." (How is the conflict developed and resolved?)*
- *Theme is the "why." (The author's message and one of the reasons why the author wrote the story or novel.)*