

NINE QUESTIONS LITERARY NINJAS ALWAYS ASK ABOUT STRUCTURE IN PROSE FICTION



Structure is the way a writer organizes ideas within a text.

You must comment on structure *as well as* language in your exams in order to be eligible for all the marks.

Asking these questions will help you generate some great points about the structure of an unseen fiction extract.

1. DESCRIPTION, DIALOGUE and ACTION: How much is there of each?

Prose fiction is a mixture of **description** (of places, people, ideas and so on), **dialogue** and **action**. Start by asking yourself how much of each there is in your extract.

What is the possible effect on the reader of each?

Descriptions help establish setting, but also to create atmosphere, to create tension, build character and to foreshadow what is coming next.

Dialogue helps establish character through speech patterns, but can also help speed up the pace of an extract, to generate excitement and to build tension.

Action can be quick and thrilling but it can be many other things: rhythmic, repetitive, plodding, long and drawn-out to create suspense, building to a climax, and so on.

2. SEQUENCE: What is the sequence of events?

Many extracts simply describe one event after another: A happened, then B happened, then C and so on. Texts which do this have a **linear** structure.

Other extracts, however, jump backwards and forwards in time, using devices such as flash backs,

time shifts or projections of what might happen later. Texts which do this have a **non-linear** structure.

What is the effect on the reader?

Linear structure is traditionally more common in prose fiction. Writers might use it because they wish to establish setting or characters clearly. They might also use it for 'rising action' (building to a climax) or 'falling action' (after a climax). Some texts build to a dramatic moment, others begin with one and proceed from there.

Non-linear structure makes use of flashbacks (analepsis), flash forwards (prolepsis), dream sequences and changes in narrative perspective (moving from one narrator to another). Writers might use this form of structure to unsettle or confuse the reader, or sometimes to mirror the mental states of a character, whose consciousness might not operate chronologically.

3. NARRATIVE VIEWPOINT: Who is narrating this story?

When you look at an extract, it is important to think about the identity of the narrator.

The narrator of the story is very powerful, controlling what the reader sees, the order they see it in and the rate at which it is revealed.

Ask yourself the following questions:

- **Is the narrator first person, second person or third person?** First-person narrators are characters in the story, meaning that the passage is likely focus intensely on that person's own conscious experience. E.g. *'Ignoring the warnings, I continued walking into the gloomy forest...'*

Second-person narrators tell the story using words like 'you', helping the reader to 'feel' what the character is feeling. E.g. *'Ignoring the warnings, you continue walking into the gloomy forest...'*

Third-person narrators, on the other hand, are usually able to move in and out of the heads of lots of characters and environments, giving the reader an overview of them all. E.g. *'Ignoring the warnings, she continued walking into the gloomy forest...'*

- **Is the narrator reliable?** Sometimes first-person narrators are not to be trusted! They may withhold information from the reader, or lie. This means that they will keep information

back, alter details or leave it out altogether. This profoundly affects the structure of the passage.

- **In what order and at what rate is information being made available to the reader?** Some narrators disclose information in an orderly, sequential way. Others hold it back from the reader, possibly for the purpose of creating suspense, before letting it all out in a burst of action.

4. SENTENCE STRUCTURES: What sentence structures does the writer use and WHY?

Remember, there are three different types of sentences: A **simple sentence** is a single clause on its own (a subject + a verb). E.g.

'The morning was misty.'

Possible effects: simple sentences can be used to explain something simply. They can also be used to create a sharp, abrupt tone to convey anger or nervousness, or to describe action which is happening very swiftly.

A **compound sentence** has two main clauses, linked by a conjunction such as 'and', 'like' or 'if'. Each clause in a compound sentence must make sense on its own. E.g.

'The morning was misty and the air was biting cold.'

Possible effects: compound sentences are used very often in descriptions to give more detail.

A **complex sentence** is a sentence with two or more clauses – but only one of them needs to make sense on its own. E.g.

'When I woke up, the morning was misty.'

Possible effects: Complex sentences are used in description to give the reader more detail, but can also be used to vary the rhythm of the text – creating atmosphere, building tension, directing the reader's attention in different directions, and so on.

REMEMBER: Writers deliberately mix sentence structures together to create particular effects. As well as focusing on particular sentences, look at how different sentence structures are combined.

5. **SENTENCE TYPES:** What sentence types has the writer used and **WHY?**

There are four main sentence types (sometimes called sentence functions). These are listed below, along with some suggestions for why writers might choose to use them.

Declarative sentences are statements: e.g. *'The rooftop is deserted.'* Writers use these to describe external environments, action, thoughts or when sketching a character.

Interrogative sentences are questions: e.g. *'Is that a baby squirrel in his salad?'* Writers might use these to create uncertainty in the reader, to generate suspense or to generate an atmosphere of mystery.

Exclamative sentences convey strong emotions: e.g. *'These socks are poisonous!'* Writers use these sentences, which usually end in an exclamation mark, to prompt many different responses in readers. They might be used to shock, to persuade, or to generate sympathy for a character in a predicament. They are particularly effective in dialogue or in letters.

Imperative sentences are instructions or orders: e.g. *'Drive to the station at three o'clock.'* These are most likely to be found in dialogue, when characters are issuing instructions to each other. They often indicate that a character is particularly assertive or commanding.

6. **SENTENCE LENGTHS:** What is the length of the sentences and **WHY?**

Writers vary the length of their sentences to create different effects.

Short sentences can be used to create suspense or to create a confusing atmosphere. E.g. *'The storm raged outside. The candle went out. Silence.'*

Longer sentences can be used to make descriptions more intricate and detailed. E.g. *'The matchbox, which was pocket-sized and bore the familiar logo of the sailing ship, had been left on the table, half-open with a few matches scattered about, as though it had been cast there by someone in a hurry.'*

They can be used to make time seem drawn out, as though it is dragging. E.g. *'I waited in the corridor all afternoon, endlessly tracing with my eyes the*

haphazard patterns of cracks in the paintwork of the opposite wall, aimlessly playing round after round of Fruit Ninja on my iPhone and gradually forgetting that there was a world outside at all.'

They can also be used to make long, continuous pieces of action seem breathless and exciting.

'Slipping on the top step, my legs flew above my head and I skidded downwards on my back, arms flailing helplessly, the edge of each step cutting into my spine as I fell bump, bump, bump down the spiral staircase.'

7. WORD ORDER: What is the order of words within sentences and WHY?

Writers often use their power to vary the order of words within a sentence to create particular effects.

Look at the difference between these two sentences:

'I was only ever to see her once more.'

'Only once more was I ever to see her.'

This example shows that simply by switching the adverbial clause 'Only once more' from the *end* to the *start* of the sentence, the writer has drawn our

attention to it, increasing the emotional impact of the sentence.

8. COHESION and COHERENCE: How cohesive is the text? How coherent is it? WHY?

Cohesion and coherence are distinct but related concepts.

Cohesion describes the way in which sentences and larger units of text (such as paragraphs) are strung together to make sense. Very few texts are just piles of unrelated sentences! In most texts, each sentence is linked to the next, which is linked to the next, and so on. In other words, it is **cohesive**.

Coherence looks beyond this to describe the way in which *ideas* are strung together in a passage. All texts are collections of ideas (images, facts, assertions, speech etc.) and coherence is about how all of these elements are arranged.

Cohesive devices

It is worth familiarizing yourself with the following cohesive devices.

- i. **Semantic and grammatical relationships:** Texts can be basically cohesive even if they do not make grammatical sense. For example, 'Vampire snuggled armchair teddy' is basically cohesive because it is possible to understand what it means. However, you need to add 'function words' for the sentence to be fully coherent: 'The vampire snuggled in the armchair with his teddy.'
- ii. **Substitution:** This is where pronouns are substituted for nouns, avoiding unnecessary repetition and increasing the fluency of a sentence. E.g. 'The vampire snuggled in the armchair with his teddy. The stuffing was coming out of it.'
- iii. **Conjunctives and discourse markers:** Writers are always using these linking devices to stitch words together within sentences and to stitch sentences to each other. Examples include: firstly, secondly, because, although, furthermore, finally, etc.
- iv. **Anaphoric reference:** This type of reference 'looks back' to a previous noun. E.g. 'The vampire is asleep. He has had a long day.'

- v. **Cataphoric reference:** This type of reference 'looks forward'. E.g. 'The vampire dreamt of it all night: a lovely holiday in Barbados.'
- vi. **Ellipsis:** This is when writers leave out words because they can be easily understood by the reader in the context of the sentence. E.g. 'The vampire woke up, (he) shambled to the kitchen, (he) made some coffee, and (he) yawned.'

9. **PATTERNS:** What patterns can you spot and **WHY** has the writer used them?

Writers use many different kinds of patterns to create effects.

Listed below are three of the most common types of pattern. Writers use them for a whole range of effects.

- i. **Repetition:** This is where writers use the same or similar words and phrases more than once. Words/phrases can be repeated in quick succession or in a more spread-out way, scattered across an extract.
- ii. **Juxtaposition:** This is where writers place two ideas or concepts closely together because

they wish to draw the reader's attention to the contrast between them.

- iii. **Emphasis:** Writers can emphasize points in a variety of ways: by restating them repeatedly, by dwelling on them (instead of moving on to the next point), or by using more finely detailed descriptions than elsewhere in the text

REMEMBER: LITERARY NINJAS ALWAYS:

- 1) **BACK UP** their points with evidence from the text and

- 2) Say **HOW** structural techniques convey the writer's meaning.

