

Critical Essay and Discussion Guidelines for SF

Use the following critical essay and discussion prompts to analyze both short stories and novels in Science Fiction. Always provide examples from the work to illustrate your answers and document your examples.

First, determine what the problem is that the story is attempting to deal with overall. Then, choose a perspective from which to analyze the story: the major characters, the minor characters, setting and atmosphere, or point of view.

A. ANALYZING MAJOR CHARACTERS

NOTICE: For a character to be classified as a major character, some observable change in character or behavior must take place by the end of the story. Characters can be very important to what takes place in a story and still not be classified as major characters. A rule of thumb for you to use is this: if a character is not significantly “different” at the end of a story than he/she was at the beginning, then he/she is not a major character. Needless to say, the distinction between major and minor characters is not always clear.

1. Explain the nature of the relationships between the major character(s) and others in the story based on his/her attitudes toward them/people in general/social expectations, etc.
2. Explain what motivates the major character(s): What does he/she want most of all, and how does this help to explain behavior and what happens to her/him/them.
3. Identify the scientific or technological aspects of the story and state whether it is a matter of hard or soft science.
4. What is the role of science or technology in the story? Is it important, or is it really unnecessary for the point the story is making? Explain.

B. ANALYZING MINOR CHARACTERS

1. Explain the nature of the relationships the minor character(s) has with others (particularly with the major character(s)) based on his/her attitudes toward him/her/them/people in general/social expectations, etc.
2. Explain what motivates the minor character(s): What does he/she/they want most of all, and how does this help to explain behavior and what happens to her/him/them.
3. What kinds of assumptions does the story make about human nature? Is there a lesson to be learned?
4. What is the role of science or technology in the story? Is it important, or is it really unnecessary for the point the story is making? Explain.

C. ANALYZING SETTING AND ATMOSPHERE

1. Identify the setting(s) for the story in place and time, and explain why that/those particular setting(s) might have been chosen for the story.
2. Identify the details of setting the author chose to isolate or emphasize, and explain why the author may have wanted to dwell on those particular details.
3. Explain what kind of atmosphere the author chose to create for this story (gloomy, dark, depressing, cold, naïve, cheerful, optimistic, scientific, etc.) and why that atmosphere is/is not appropriate for what takes place in the story.
4. What is the role of science or technology in the story? Is it important, or is it really unnecessary for the point the story is making? Explain.

D. ANALYZING POINT OF VIEW

NOTICE: Unless the author specifically tells us that he or she is narrating the story we are reading, the Narrator in a short story is a character just like any other character in the story. In short, we should not, and actually must not claim that the Narrator's point of view is the author's point of view.

1. What kind of Narrator tells the story? Is the Narrator's information reliable? If you think the Narrator is not reliable, explain why and what the author's purpose would be for using an unreliable Narrator.
2. Explain from whose point of view the story is being told. What kinds of information / knowledge does the Narrator make sure we know about, and what kinds of details does the Narrator choose not to tell us? Explain why the Narrator chooses to emphasize some details and brush aside others.
3. What is the role of science or technology in the story? Is it important, or is it really unnecessary for the point the story is making? Explain.
4. What attitudes are displayed regarding science and technology where responsibility, accountability, and human values are concerned?