

Decoding Decoding:
A Decoding the Disciplines Approach to Analyzing Fiction
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When tasked with writing an essay analyzing a work of fiction, many student writers are unable to articulate themselves beyond whether they *like* or *dislike* the text and their essays often read more like plot summaries than analyses. Learning to read and analyze fiction at a high level is difficult because it has so many shifting elements a reader must consider. David Pace and Joan Middendorf refer to these types of complex critical thinking obstacles as “bottlenecks,” (2004) which can be overcome using the following “Decoding the Disciplines” method.

Step1: What is the Bottleneck?

In-depth textual analysis begins with reading but is often only detected in writing. Failure to analyze a text leads to superficial essays that may quote, paraphrase, and summarize, but lack interpretation. When students fail to analyze a text, they fail to interact with the text, thus missing out on the potential messages and meanings a rich text has to offer. Instead, students believe that the meaning of a text is predetermined and fixed, and that all questions about a text have a right and a wrong answer. This causes many students to become hesitant to give their opinions for fear of being wrong, which then encourages students to read with the sole purpose of comprehension, not interpretation or analysis.

When students do not read the text in a critical way, their writing and discussions in the classroom suffer. When asked about a text, students will often reply with “I liked it” or “I didn’t like it.” But without further prodding from a teacher, students do not attempt to answer the crucial question of *why* they liked or did not like the text. Many students are unaware of the multiple levels a text can operate on, and therefore cannot analyze what they do not see. While reading, these students focus on what the words are literally saying. They ignore the context and structure of the piece and do not consider how these other factors may influence their understanding of the reading.

As a result, students turn in writing assignments that do not meet their teacher’s standards. Passages quoted as evidence are re-paraphrased instead of analyzed. By confusing summary with interpretation, students are unable to create strong arguments and essays end up looking more like book reports.

In secondary school students are taught various mnemonics to remember how to write essays or short responses such as “RACE” (restate, answer, cite, explain). Students know that after the evidence they are supposed to include some sort of analysis or explanation, but lack the reading and interpreting skills to actually do so. Without an understanding of how to interact with the text, students will continue putting superficial analysis in their written work.

Analyzing fiction is not easy, and has become a bottleneck for student writers of academic essays. To overcome this, students must learn to read a text with a purpose beyond comprehension of the plot. In other words, students must become experts.

Step 2: How Does an Expert Analyze Fiction?

A good interpretation of a text by an expert analyzer is firmly rooted in strong reading strategies. When an expert reads a piece of fiction she questions both the content and the structure. She asks herself *What is the text saying?* And *How is the text saying it?* She will read a work multiple times, once for comprehension and potentially several more times looking for details open to interpretation. Once these details are probed and prodded, and a particular interpretation of the text can be earnestly supported, the expert can confidently explain and defend her analysis in writing.

An expert knows that liking or disliking a text is separate from analyzing it. In fact, without an in-depth analysis, a reader may miss out on the underlying message of a text, causing him to think the work shallow and superficial, thus deciding he does not like it. A thorough analysis may have given the same reader the meaning he sought, simultaneously creating a much more enjoyable reading experience. Experts also analyze texts to better understand how a piece works a whole. Is the ending earned? Does the piece effectively comment on society? An in-depth analysis helps the expert find these answers.

To do this, experts attempt to “unpack” as much of the text as possible. By breaking down parts of a text into its components, the expert finds meaningful elements that explain or represent so much more than is literally said in the text itself. While the list below is not exhaustive, here are eight major elements of a text that an expert may break down, or unpack, to find deeper understanding.

Textual elements to be analyzed:

- Conflict

- Context
- Characters
- Significant Moments
- The Ending
- Word Deployment
- Repetition
- Symbols

Step 3: How Can These Elements Be Explicitly Modeled?

To become an expert, a student writer cannot be a passive reader. She must learn to ask questions of the text, and to find the answers inside the text. As with all new skills, becoming proficient at interpreting fiction takes practice. To strengthen students' ability to analyze a text, the following models have been developed for students to conceptualize the eight key elements.

Conflict: Understanding the nature of the conflict in a fiction text can help reveal the theme of the piece. When looking at conflict, students should not only consider what side of a conflict the protagonist represents, but also what side the antagonist represents, as well as the “smaller” conflicts of minor characters and plotlines. When interpreting conflict, a student must ask herself what larger message the author might be trying to articulate.

To model the nuances of evaluating conflict, students can think about the movie *Finding Nemo* (2003). In this animated film, a father searches the ocean for his lost son, Nemo, a clown fish who has been taken from his home. A central conflict in the movie is that Nemo has been taken from the ocean by humans to live a life in an office aquarium. Could the author also be saying something about man's influence on nature? Or maybe this movie isn't about man at all, and merely a story about a father's love. Only by analyzing the conflict can an expert find the textual evidence necessary to support either claim.

Context: Context can refer to the time period and location in which a work was written (external context), as well as to how words can mean different things when placed in different circumstances (internal context). External context will not factor in to every text, but it can be helpful to understand the milieu in which the piece was written in order to avoid developing false assumptions.

To better understand the importance of internal context to a work, the students can watch the following commercial: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k29ogXL_S2U.

This ad ('Jacked Up' 2017) shows characters involved in two drastically different situations with the exact same words being said by the characters. In one, a car has been stolen, whereas in the other a car has been received as a gift. In these two situations the words "Oh my God!" and "You've got to be kidding," take on vastly different meanings.

Characters: Students can struggle defining "who" a character is. Often students are hesitant to judge a character in a text, as they have been taught in real life to reserve judgement. But in fiction, the author attributes specific traits to characters so that readers have the clues necessary to make accurate judgements. Students need to develop confidence in those judgements. In this model, playing with Mr. and Mrs. Potato Head toys can help.

Changing costumes and accessories to the Potato Head toys changes "who they are." Is Mrs. Potato Head a cop or a ballet dancer? Does she wear diamonds or a stethoscope? Is Mr. Potato Head a cowboy or a bank robber? Does he have a monocle or a mohawk? These quick changes change everything. Students must trust their instincts about the character traits they read in fiction, because they determine who each character is. Does a character have a bellowing laugh or a giggle? Is she an animal lover or do dogs bark when she passes on the street? What do these traits say about the character? Paying close attention to the small details about characters can help create rich, nuanced analyses of those characters.

Significant Moments: Just like in a fiction text, a basketball game has moments that mean more than others. The ending may be the most important, as who has won and who has lost is now established, but there are also many smaller moments leading up to that ending that have contributed to the final outcome. But not all moments are created equal. There are many back-and-forth moments in a game that cancel each other out, but an injury to a star player could be a very big moment—just like the death of a main character in a story.

A three-point shot with a minute remaining, a blocked shot that changes momentum, a big play just before halftime. These could all be big moments that play heavily on the outcome of a basketball game. Similarly, when the couple first meet and fall in love, or when the soldier decides he can no longer fight the war, or when the thief steals the jewels but spares the owner's life, could be key moments in fiction. Paying attention to these significant moments and

understanding how they led to the ending is a good step towards understanding how a text works as a whole.

The Ending: The way a text ends often underscores or epitomizes the meaning of the story. By understanding and interpreting the ending of a story, students can be confident of their analysis as they move away from *like* and *dislike*. To model this skill, use the following two storylines:

Once upon a time there was a beautiful princess. This princess lived in a high tower and was never allowed to leave the protection of her father's castle. One day she decided to sneak out. When she finally left the castle, she met a handsome prince, fell in love, and lived happily ever after.

Once upon a time there was a beautiful princess. This princess lived in a high tower and was never allowed to leave the protection of her father's castle. One day she decided to sneak out. When she finally left the castle, she was eaten by a bear.

These two stories have identical plots except for the different endings. What might these stories be saying about betraying one's parents? What might they be saying about taking risks and following one's dreams? Students must determine how the different endings change the meaning of the stories.

Word Deployment: Words matter, not only the words we use to describe something but also the words we leave out. Good analytical readers pay attention to both. Having conversations about dating can help students understand the importance of word deployment.

Consider the words we use and do not use while dating someone new. If a friend asks "Was he cute?" and you reply, "He has a good personality," it can be assumed the person is not all that attractive to you. You never said he was ugly - those words were left out - but because of the words you did use - "good personality" to describe appearance, it's a good bet the person is not attractive to you.

Another example is when a person you've just met "ghosts" you (doesn't reply to texts or calls). You might have had a great time on the first date and maybe you think things are going well. But because the person is not answering - not using any words at all - you can be fairly sure

she is just not that into you. However, if she replies to all of your messages and even starts conversations of her own, that is a clue that she is interested and wants to engage at a deeper level.

In literature the same rules apply, and students should learn to trust the words on the page. After all, the author chose those specific words on purpose. The same holds true when something is NOT being said in the text. Students should ask themselves what it means when something is left out. Often what isn't said is more powerful than what is.

Repetition: As songs often do with the use of a chorus, fiction texts will also repeat key words, phrases, or ideas in order to emphasize important points. If a text has a strong theme, it stands to reason the theme will come up more than once and (potentially) in different ways. The effect can be heavy-handed in some cases, but in others it helps to grasp the underlying message of the story.

In groups, students will name five songs that have a repeated chorus. Students will then decide how the verses of the song relate to the chorus, and vice-versa. Just as the repetition of the chorus of a song usually expresses its theme, repetition in fiction can often tip expert readers off to the text's main ideas.

Finding Symbols: Symbols play a big role in fiction, as they can indicate additional ideas and subtly convey meaning. Symbols can represent a language all their own, much like emojis in text messages. And just like with emojis, the interpretation of symbols in fiction can have a dramatic effect on understanding.

How many different ways can we interpret the meaning of emojis? Consider:



Is this money-mouth face good or bad? Positive or negative? Does it mean wealth or greed? Does it mean that a person has earned a lot of money or is solely focused on money? It can mean each of these things, and potentially many more depending on the internal context of the text. We interpret the meaning of the money-mouth face in relation to the other words and emojis in the text message. Symbols in literature, just like emojis in text messages, stand in for something else: the ideas and meaning they represent. In fiction, a symbol might be an object, a character, or even an image, and students must ask themselves what these symbols are standing in for.

Step 4: How Will Students Practice Analyzing Fiction and Get Feedback?

Just as a carpenter does not use every tool in her toolbox for every job, an academic writer will not need to analyze every element for every assignment. The trick is to become proficient in all of them, and to be able to discern which elements are the most useful for each particular text and each particular essay. To become an expert, students must practice these skills with low-stake assignments, accompanied by feedback from their peers.

Once the tasks in Step 3 have been modeled and discussed, and the students are becoming familiar with the concepts of each textual element to be analyzed, it is time to practice on a short piece of fiction. It is recommended to have a classroom discussion about offering quality feedback *before* beginning the sequence of assignments to follow.

Below is a sample schedule for a three-week analysis block for a college class that meets twice a week. Short stories #1 and #2 should be chosen by the teacher, and be complex enough for multiple interpretations, as well as short enough to allow for multiple readings.

At the end of the block, students will have turned in analyses for each element for two different stories. These analyses should be graded and responded to by the teacher, and can also be used to encourage students to focus on the stronger points of analysis for further development into a full essay.

Sample Schedule:

Week 1 Monday: Analysis Intro and Modeling

Class discussion about the importance of analysis and an introduction to the eight analysis elements. A thorough discussion of the models (as outlined in Step 3) should be given. If time allows, break students into eight groups, one for each element, and have each group devise and present a new model for their element.

Homework: read short story #1.

Wednesday: Practice

The teacher will guide the class through eight analysis exercises (see guided questions below); one for each element for short story #1. To each probing question, students should write their interpretation in as much detail as possible and include supporting evidence from the text.

Homework: type up and revise analyses written in class.

Week 2 **Monday:** Peer review and feedback

In small groups of three or four, students will share their analyses. Feedback should be given on how well each writer explained her analyses and supported them with textual evidence.

Homework: revise and retype analyses based on the feedback.

Wednesday: Peer review and feedback

In the same groups as the previous class, students will share their revised analyses and receive peer feedback.

Homework: read short story #2, and revise analyses of short story #1 to turn in.

Week 3 **Monday:** Practice

The teacher will guide the class through eight analysis exercises; one for each element for short story #2. To each probing question, students should write their interpretation and include supporting evidence from the text. Teacher should collect final analyses for short story #1.

Homework: type up and revise analyses for short story #2.

Wednesday: Peer review and feedback

In small groups of three or four, students will share their analyses. Feedback should be given on how well each writer explained her analyses and supported them with textual evidence.

Homework: revise and retype analyses to turn in.

For the “Practice” days outlined above, the following questions can be used by the teacher to guide students through an analysis of each short story. Students must have read the story before doing this analysis, and they should have access to the story while answering the questions so that they may capture the supporting evidence to back up their interpretations.

Conflict: What are the sources of tension in the text? What goals are attempting to be achieved? By whom?

Describe in detail as many types of conflict as possible, including internal (emotional) as well as external (physical). Be sure to outline both sides of each conflict, not just the side of the protagonist or the side you may “agree” with.

Context: For external context: What do you know about the time period the story was written in and/or is about? Are there differences in the norms and laws of today? If so, how do those differences affect the characters in the story?

For internal context: How does the setting in the story contribute to the actions and dialogue of the characters? How does the situation playing out in the story contribute to the actions and dialogue of the characters? If you changed either of these (setting or situation), would it have an effect on your understanding of the character’s actions and dialogue? How so?

Characters: Define the main characters. What are their attributes and goals? Why are they the way they are (how have their back stories “created” them)? If you were to change one major thing about a character’s past, would it change the story itself? How so? Why?

Do you know anybody in “real life” who shares the same traits as any of the characters? How do those traits affect the way you see that person? If you were to change or remove those traits from that person, how would your views of that person change? Do you think those changes would change the way the person acts? Why?

Significant Moments: Make an outline of the story using only the most important events. Why was each of these events so important? How do these moments help you better understand who the characters are in the story? If you changed the outcome of any of these moments, would the story be the same? Why?

The Ending: What happens at the end of the story? Is there a moral or a message to be taken away? Do you think the author is trying to “say something?” If so, what? What textual evidence can you find to support your interpretation?

Does the ending feel inevitable from the significant moments from above? Is there anything that feels “unearned,” or not believable, about the ending? Why?

Word Deployment: Consider the ending and the significant moments you outlined above and determine how language was used in each part of the story. If a scene has dialogue, can you determine the tone and emotion of the characters? If the scene is exposition, can you determine the mood and pacing? In both, is there anything that feels “missing” or anything you can “read between the lines?” If so, what textual evidence leads you to think this?

If you were to rewrite those scenes, would you have changed any of the words? Why? What would have changed along with the words?

Repetition: Find as many instances of repetition in the text as possible, this includes repeated words, objects, and ideas. In relation to the story, is there a deeper meaning or reason for the repetition? What is the author trying to call your attention to?

Symbols: Do any physical objects play an important role in the story? If so, what ideas could those objects represent? What about characters? Is it possible any of the characters in the story represent something other than what they are? How about images? Are there any lasting images from the text that might have been inserted to make you think of something else? In your answers, is there any overlap with your list of repetition from above? Are the symbols being repeated? If so, why do you think that is?

Upon collecting the responses each teacher must decide how he will grade them, but they should be graded or responded to in some manner. A sample rubric has been included in Step 6 below. It is also recommended for teachers to use these responses to guide students to further develop their strongest points of analysis into full analytical essays, if required in the class. Students are well on their way to having multiple peer-reviewed body paragraphs.

Step 5: What Will Motivate the Students?

The need for student motivation while going through the “Decoding the Disciplines” process is crucial. Presented with a series of small steps to be individually practiced instead of being told to simply “write an essay,” may cause some students to brush aside the work. Students may view these smaller tasks as “beneath” them or “not the real assignment.” Any instructor teaching the “Decoding the Disciplines” method will need to outline specific goals and offer meaningful feedback for each step along the way.

Another key to keeping students motivated is to understand how they feel about writing in the first place. Students who spend all day on their phones typing lengthy messages to friends on social media may be afraid of writing multi-page analytical essays. Understanding what parts of writing students do like can be helpful when tailoring each step to individual classrooms. It is also important to know how students view the concept of drafting, as they will undoubtedly be required to write multiple drafts of essays. A teacher will also want to know which students foster a *growth* or a *fixed* mindset. Students who view learning as a sequence of acquiring more

and more difficult skills (growth mindset) are typically much more open to the rigor of reading and re-reading a text in order to thoroughly analyze it. Students who prefer to perform tasks they have already mastered (fixed mindset) are typically less motivated to spend the time and effort needed to comprehensively interpret a text.

To better understand the beliefs and habits of any classroom, the teacher will want to administer a survey about the subject at the beginning of the semester. For Analyzing Fiction, the following survey was developed.

Writing Survey:

1. How important is writing in your life? Why do you say that?
2. On an average day, what sort of things do you write and how much? (texts, emails, short stories, etc.)
3. Besides having “good ideas,” what does it take to be a good writer? Why do you say that?
4. Which is more important: the content of a piece of writing (what it says) or the structure of the writing (how it says it)? Why do you say that?
5. Quality writing often requires the writer to write multiple drafts. On a scale from 1 to 5 (1 = never, 5 = always), how often do you write multiple drafts of a piece of writing?
6. Do you consider yourself more naturally intelligent or more of a hard worker? Why do you say that?
7. When you become good at a skill, do you like to continue practicing the same skill or trying a new skill that is even more challenging? Why do you say that?
8. When a teacher asks a difficult question you are somewhat unsure of, are you likely to raise your hand and give an answer even if you’re wrong, or wait for someone else to answer? Why do you say that?
9. Do you believe that if a person needs to try really hard to accomplish a task, it must mean that person does not have a lot of ability in that task? Why do you say that?
10. When you make a mistake, do you want other people to know about it so they might help you understand it better or do you prefer to keep your mistakes private? Why?

Students with fixed mindsets typically respond well to praise for a job well done, but becoming an expert at analyzing fiction takes time. Identifying the students with fixed mindsets

ahead of time, will better prepare the teacher to understand and address any frustration when these students are not “perfect” on their first effort. Encouraging students to slow down and take as much time as needed in each step of this process will help students obtain maximum benefit. Mastering each technique, thinking about texts in deeper ways, and feeling more confident to contribute to classroom discussions about fiction texts, will serve to reinforce each student’s effort. The higher grades students will receive on analysis assignments, not to mention the enhanced enjoyment while reading, will only further motivate students to keep practicing and learning.

Step 6: How Well Are Students Analyzing Fiction?

While the ultimate classroom goal of a student becoming an expert at analyzing fiction is to help that student write better essays, the act of analyzing is only one step in the larger essay-writing process. A quality essay includes good writing mechanics, proper idea development, correct citations (when necessary), and much more. Therefore, to assess whether students are mastering the learning tasks associated with analyzing fiction, a teacher should *not* use a final essay but rather the tasks outlined in Step 4 after they have been peer-reviewed by classmates and revised multiple times.

By assessing the analysis of each textual element and not a final essay, a teacher will be able to provide specific feedback for each individual element, focusing the student’s attention on the elements which need the most practice, as well as recognizing the elements which the student is already analyzing expertly. This also allows for the teacher to recommend to the student which elements to concentrate on for her essay, as some elements may not apply or be necessary for the particular essay assigned. Once the teacher has approved the student’s analyses and given recommendations for her essay, the student can begin writing the full paper, which will have its own set of distinct requirements only part of which will be analysis.

To assess the analysis of the textual elements, a teacher can use a simple rubric ranging from “Unacceptable” to “Proficient.” A sample rubric has been provided below, but can be customized for each classroom.

Analyzing Fiction Rubric:

Competencies	Unacceptable	Developing	Proficient
Conflict	Unable to identify the primary and secondary sources of conflict in the text.	Able to recognize the primary sources of conflict in the text, but not secondary sources.	Able to identify both the primary and secondary sources of conflict in the text.
Context (external = time period/location the text was written) (internal = circumstances of the story)	Unable to recognize the external or internal context of a text, and misuses passages as evidence in their analysis.	Able to partially recognize the external or internal context of the text, and uses passages of the text as evidence but provides incomplete analysis.	Able to fully recognize the external and internal context of the text, and accurately uses passages of the text as evidence in their analysis.
Characters	Unable to assess primary and secondary characters in the text, and misuses character traits in their analysis.	Able to partially assess primary and/or secondary characters in the text, and provides incomplete analysis of character traits.	Able to assess primary and secondary characters in the text, and provides detailed analysis of character traits.
Significant Moments	Able to pick out key passages of the text and summarize them, but cannot explain their significance to the story as a whole.	Able to pick out key passages of the text but can only partially explain their significance to the story as a whole.	Able to pick out key passages of the text and fully explain their significance to the story as a whole.
The Ending	Unable to recognize how the ending of a text delivers a message or that it underscores the meaning of the text.	Able to recognize how the ending of a text delivers a message or that it underscores the meaning of the text, but provides incomplete analysis.	Able to recognize how the ending of a text delivers a message or that it underscores the meaning of the text, and provides in-depth analysis.

Word Deployment	Unable to recognize word choice beyond literal definitions of words, not evaluating other possible meanings or read between the lines at what is left unsaid.	Able to recognize that word choice matters, but only able to partially evaluate alternate meanings to words and/or read between the lines at what is left unsaid.	Able to recognize that word choice matters, and fully evaluate alternate meanings to words and read between the lines at what is left unsaid.
Repetition	Unable to find instances of repetition in the text (when the text has repetition).	Able to find instances of repetition in the text, but provides incomplete analysis.	Able to find instances of repetition in the text, and provides in-depth analysis.
Symbols	Unable to find symbols in the text (when the text uses symbolism).	Able to find symbols in the text, but provides incomplete analysis.	Able to find symbols in the text, and provides in-depth analysis.

Final Thoughts

Going through the “Decoding the Disciplines” process for analyzing fiction has illuminated a number of key principles every teacher should be mindful of. No matter the bottleneck, “Decoding the Disciplines” helps to break down large, complicated tasks into easier-to-manage steps. By focusing on these smaller steps, students can practice and gain skills incrementally until they have accumulated the knowledge required to successfully complete the larger task. Sometimes teachers forget all the time and effort it took to become experts in our respective fields. We forget all the late nights, all the errors and mistakes, all the lessons learned. This is certainly true of analyzing fiction.

As a college writing teacher, I am often frustrated by the lack of depth in analytical essays. Student papers are often more like book reports than actual essays, paraphrasing and summarizing rather than interpreting. The problem is that many students have not been exposed to this kind of textual analysis before, and what is obvious and clear for me, can be entirely out of focus for the students.

“Decoding the Disciplines” empowers students by bringing these small details into focus. Coming up with a well-thought-out and textually supported analysis is difficult, and to do this

experts must unpack as much of the text as possible. Breaking the work apart, analyzing small portions of it and discussing that analysis with peers, will help students feel confident in their interpretations of each textual element, and will also help them better understand how each story works as a whole.

By using the “Decoding the Disciplines” method for analyzing fiction, students will be able to break through the bottleneck of merely evaluating a text for *like* and *dislike*, moving beyond mere plot summaries and book reports and achieving real in-depth analysis. This will lead to better analytical essays and better grades. Most importantly of all, becoming expert analyzers of fiction will create a more enjoyable reading experience.

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