

How can you develop a strong evaluation of a selection of literature?

Your evaluation of a work of literature is more than giving your opinion about it. A good evaluation contains an argument supported by evidence taken directly from the text. The following steps will help you understand how to develop a strong evaluation.

Step 1: Break down the selection into literary elements: setting, character, point of view, plot, and theme.

Step 2: Ask questions about the the literary elements.

Step 3: Evaluate the work based upon the qualities of good literature.

Step 1: Break down the selection into literary elements: plot, character, setting, theme, point of view.

The following elements are the building blocks that make up a story. These are the elements you will be judging in an evaluation.

- **Setting:** time and place of the story
- **Character:** main and secondary characters
- **Point of View:** who is telling the story; the narrator
- **Plot:** sequence of events in a story, including exposition, rising action, climax, falling action (denouement)
- **Theme:** central idea of the story

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Directions: Read the story “Plainswoman” on pages 105–117. Fill in a description of each element listed in the chart.

Element	Description	
Setting		
Character(s)		
		<i>continued</i>

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Element	Description	
Point of View		
Plot		<i>continued</i>

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Element	Description	
Plot		
Theme		

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Your responses may look like this.

Element	Description	
Setting	a ranch in the American West, probably during the late 1800s	
Character(s)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Nora, a young bride, new to the West, newly pregnant• Rolf, her rough but loving husband, ranch owner• Pleny, a ranch hand	<i>continued</i>

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Element	Description	
Point of View	A limited-omniscient narrator tells the story from Nora's point of view.	
Plot	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Nora marries Rolf and moves West.• She finds it difficult to adjust to the dangers of living on the frontier.• Rolf goes to round up the cattle, leaving Pleny with Nora.• Pleny's finger becomes infected and Nora must cut it off.	<i>continued</i>

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Element	Description	
Plot	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Nora laughs when the baby in her womb kicks her, as Rolf returns home.	
Theme	The difficulties of living in the West transform a fearful woman into a strong, independent person.	

Step 2: Ask questions about the the literary elements.

Asking questions will help you understand each element so that you can evaluate the story as a whole.

- **Setting:** How does the setting contribute to the plot and the theme?
- **Character:** What are the characters like? Do any characters change during the story? Are the characters believable?
- **Point of View:** How does the choice of narrator affect the reader's understanding? Is the narrator reliable? Are there multiple points of view?

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- **Plot:** How does the plot develop the theme? How does the plot reveal aspects of character? What keeps the plot moving? Does the plot make sense?
- **Theme:** Does the theme flow logically from the other elements of the story?

A basic question to ask about each element is, “Why is this important to the main idea of the story?”

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Directions: Fill in the third row in the chart by answering the question, “Why is this important?”

Element	Description	Importance
Setting	a ranch in the American West, probably during the late 1800s	
Character(s)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Nora, a young bride, new to the West, newly pregnant• Rolf, her rough but loving husband, ranch owner• Pleny, a ranch hand	<i>continued</i>

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Element	Description	Importance
Point of View	A limited-omniscient narrator tells the story from Nora's point of view.	
Plot	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Nora marries Rolf and moves West.• She finds it difficult to adjust to the dangers of living on the frontier.• Rolf goes to round up the cattle, leaving Pleny with Nora.	<i>continued</i>

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Element	Description	Importance
Plot	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Pleny's finger becomes infected and Nora must cut it off.• Nora laughs when the baby in her womb kicks her, as Rolf returns home.	
Theme	The difficulties of living in the West transform a fearful woman into a strong, independent one	

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Your responses may look like this.

Element	Description	Importance
Setting	a ranch in the American West, probably during the late 1800s	The setting creates the central conflict of Nora vs. the dangers of living on the frontier.
Character(s)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Nora, a young bride, new to the West, newly pregnant• Rolf, her rough but loving husband, ranch owner• Pleny, a ranch hand	<p>The contrast between how Nora and Rolf view life on the frontier creates conflict and moves the plot.</p> <p><i>continued</i></p>

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Element	Description	Importance
Point of View	A limited-omniscient narrator tells the story from Nora's point of view.	This gives us a glimpse into Nora's mind and creates sympathy for her.
Plot	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Nora marries Rolf and moves West.• She finds it difficult to adjust to the dangers of living on the frontier.• Rolf goes to round up the cattle, leaving Pleny with Nora.	Nora and Rolf react differently to events, highlighting their differences. <i>continued</i>

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Element	Description	Importance
Plot	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Pleny's finger becomes infected and Nora must cut it off.• Nora laughs when the baby in her womb kicks her as Rolf returns home.	The situation with Pleny's finger brings the action to a climax, forcing Nora face the difficulties of life or run away.
Theme	The difficulties of living in the West transform a fearful woman into a strong, independent one	Nora sees the baby kicking inside as a "child of the plains," strong and brave. Nora too is strong and brave.

Step 3: Evaluate the work based upon the qualities of good literature.

Once you've analyzed the text by breaking it down into its basic elements, you can make a judgment about the quality of the work. In other words, you can say whether the writer did a good job of creating an interesting plot, well-developed characters, a vivid setting, and a thought-provoking theme.

Directions: Use the questions on the following screens to help you evaluate "Plainswoman." Write your answers on a separate piece of paper.

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- **Setting:** Is the setting appropriate to the theme?
- **Character:** Are the characters believable and well-developed?
Do you sympathize with or dislike the appropriate characters?
- **Point of View:** Is the point of view appropriate? How well does the point of view communicate the theme?
- **Plot:** How well does the plot advance the author's theme?
- **Theme:** Do all the elements work together to advance the writer's theme? Do you agree or disagree with the main idea of the work?

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You may also want to evaluate the selection based upon some general criteria of good literature.

- Does the work challenge ideas and beliefs?
- Is the work intellectually challenging without being obscure?
- Does the work give you satisfaction or pleasure?

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Possible Response: In “Plainswoman,” a young bride from the East is confronted with the dangers of life on the frontier. The writer describes the setting in vivid terms so that the reader sees the West itself as the antagonist Nora must face. Unfortunately, the writer gives few clues as to why Nora was persuaded to marry a rough cowboy and venture West at all. The reader sympathizes when Nora, pregnant and alone, must cut off Pleny’s infected finger. In the end, Nora performs the necessary amputation “because she was woman and was here, and birth, survival, help, lay potent, sweet, powerful in her heart and in her hands.” The ending is hopeful and satisfying.