Developing Skills for Evaluation

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 literary elements.

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

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

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

Directions: Read the story "The Growin' of Paul Bunyan" on pages 16–23. Fill in a description of each element listed in following chart.

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Element	Description	
Setting		
Character(s)		
Point of View		*continued*

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Element	Description	
Plot		
Theme		

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Your responses may look like this.

Element	Description	
Setting	the northern United States	
Character(s)	• Paul Bunyan • Johnny Appleseed	
Point of View	A narrator tells the story.	*continued*

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Element	Description	
Plot	• Paul Bunyan is agitated by a moose in his shoe. To calm himself, he cuts down trees. • Johnny Appleseed plants seeds that grow into trees almost immediately. • In three days, Bunyan chops down all the trees Appleseed has planted in six days.	*continued*

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Element	Description	
Plot	• Bunyan decides to try planting a tree. In response to warnings from Appleseed, he nurtures it. However, it dies. • Appleseed magically turns Bunyan's ax into a tree. Bunyan calls it a *redwood.* • Bunyan gives up chopping down trees and instead plants redwood seeds all over the Northwest.	*continued*

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Element	Description	
Theme	The central theme is that working with nature is more rewarding than working against it.	

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Step 2: Ask questions about the literary elements.

Asking questions will help you understand each element of the story so that you can evaluate it.

• **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 column in the chart by answering the question, "Why is this important?"

Element	Description	Importance
Setting	the northern United States	
		continued

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Element	Description	Importance
Character(s)	• Paul Bunyan • Johnny Appleseed	*continued*

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Element	Description	Importance
Point of View	A narrator tells the story.	*continued*

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Element	Description	Importance
Plot	• Paul Bunyan is agitated by a moose in his shoe. To calm himself, he cuts down trees. • Johnny Appleseed plants seeds that grow into trees almost immediately. • In three days, Bunyan chops down all the trees Appleseed has planted in six days.	*continued*

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Element	Description	Importance
Plot	• Bunyan decides to try planting a tree. In response to warnings from Appleseed, he nurtures it. However, it dies. • Appleseed magically turns Bunyan's ax into a tree. Bunyan calls it a *redwood.* • Bunyan gives up chopping down trees and instead plants redwood seeds all over the Northwest.	*continued*

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Element	Description	Importance
Theme	The central theme is that working with nature is more rewarding than working against it.	

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Your responses may look like this.

Element	Description	Importance
Setting	the northern United States	Portions of this area were heavily wooded and supported a large timber industry. *continued*

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Element	Description	Importance
Character(s)	• Paul Bunyan • Johnny Appleseed	Bunyan is one of the most famous characters in American folklore. Appleseed is based on a real person and is also is the subject of folktales. *continued*

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Element	Description	Importance
Point of View	A narrator tells the story.	The narrator is a neutral observer who describes the actions of both Bunyan and Appleseed. *continued*

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Element	Description	Importance
Plot	• Paul Bunyan is agitated by a moose in his shoe. To calm himself, he cuts down trees. • Johnny Appleseed plants seeds that grow into trees almost immediately. • In three days, Bunyan chops down all the trees Appleseed has planted in six days.	The conflict between Bunyan and Appleseed reflects a larger conflict between those who want to use natural resources thoughtlessly and those who realize the importance of working with nature. *continued*

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Element	Description	Importance
Plot	• Bunyan decides to try planting a tree. In response to warnings from Appleseed, he nurtures it. However, it dies. • Appleseed magically turns Bunyan's ax into a tree. Bunyan calls it a *redwood*. • Bunyan gives up chopping down trees and instead plants redwood seeds all over the Northwest.	Bunyan learns how difficult growing a tree is and he develops new respect for nature. *continued*

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Element	Description	Importance
Theme	The central theme is that working with nature is more rewarding than working against it.	The story prompts readers to reconsider how they view nature.

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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 each of the following:

• an interesting plot

• well-developed characters

• a vivid setting

• a thought-provoking theme

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Directions: Use the questions below to help you evaluate "The Growin' of Paul Bunyan." Write your answers on a separate piece of paper.

- **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: "The Growin' of Paul Bunyan" is a humorous story in the tradition of folktales. The first part of the story introduces the two main characters, Paul Bunyan and Johnny Appleseed. The narrator uses exaggerated details effectively to describe Bunyan's shoelaces and how quickly trees planted by Appleseed grow. When Bunyan plants his own tree, it dies. This causes him to understand how precious living trees are. Bunyan decides to stop cutting down trees and to start planting redwood seeds.