

How to identify techniques and devices in a short story

Before you begin

What you need:

Related text: **"Powder" by Tobias Wolff**

Approximate time this exercise should take you: **30 minutes**

Reminder

Literary techniques and devices are a combination of components. Literary elements, such as setting, conflict, point of view of narration and theme are apparent in almost all short stories and fall under the heading "Techniques and devices." Other such techniques and devices are symbol, image, irony, metaphor and simile. Literary techniques and devices, then, are specific aspects of literature that we can recognize, identify, interpret or analyse and that contribute to the overall understanding of the text. In this exercise, you will work on general questions about literary techniques and devices that should help to reinforce your comprehension of the story.

Instructions

Answer the questions about techniques and devices below. Compare your responses to those you will find in the **Answer key**. Although answers may vary, it is likely your responses will be similar. The words in bold indicate the techniques and devices.

Exercise

1. Describe the influence of the **setting** on the **characters**. How does the setting connect to conflict in the text?

2. How does the **setting** of “Powder” **symbolize** the characters’ moods and personalities?

3. What change does the **narrator**, the son, go through in the story?

4. How does the author’s **writing style** depict the key ideas in the story?

5. How do the **title** and the references to jazz music and musicians symbolize the personality of the father in the story?

6. Why is there **repetition** of the word “snow” in the story?

7. What kind of **imagery** predominates in the story? Where and why is imagery used in the text?

8. Examine the **narrative point of view**. Is the narration from various viewpoints or is the story restricted to the perspective of just one character?

9. How is **foreshadowing** used in the text?

10. How is **irony** used in the story?

Answer key

1. Christmas Eve and the winter storm set the mood for the story. Not only does the sudden and intense snowfall create tension between the father and son because of how each faces the challenge of the storm, it also represents the stormy and turbulent relationship that likely exists between the separated parents. Wolff uses the setting as a metaphor for the uncertainty that exists in the relationships between father/son and husband/wife in the story.
2. The setting symbolizes the moods and personalities of the characters, especially that of the father, because we see how unpredictable he is in his approach to life, just like the unpredictable weather. The peaceful and untouched vista at the end of the story illustrates how the son has come to the realization he can accept his father as he is, and he actually relaxes and enjoys the adventure in the end. This “virgin” snow and “fresh powder” show the son’s coming of age and a level of maturity he has reached in accepting his father’s unpredictable behaviour.
3. The narrator changes from a nervous, anxious, overly cautious individual to someone much more accepting and willing to trust and enjoy his father’s company and abilities at the end of the story.
4. Wolff’s writing style is simplistic, yet descriptive. In his carefully selected language, the landscape and snowstorm are very vivid and strong, but the reader can also equate the changes in the description of the intensity of the storm with the narrator’s acceptance of his father.
5. The title, “Powder,” and the jazz theme represent the father’s loose and unstructured personality and behaviour, just like powdery, loose snow and classic unstructured jazz music.
6. The repetition of the word “snow” in the text reinforces the idea of the conflict between the father and son – sometimes calm and sometimes stormy. The snow also is the common focus of father and son – and does bring them together and help them to bond in their experience.
7. The imagery of the intensity and variation of the snowstorm – from blinding and hissing at the beginning of the story, to falling straight down, to the unbroken surface of snow – vivifies the evolution of the narrator, the dynamic character, and the personality of the father. It can also be equated with the challenges they must overcome.

8. Wolff uses first-person narration so that the reader can “hear” the voice of the son, his hesitations, worry and concern. Also, we see that the boy understands his father’s flaws and works through acceptance of them in the story in the same way he seems to have worked through the acceptance of his parents’ separation.
9. Foreshadowing: The opening lines indicate the lack of trust the mother/wife has for her ex-husband’s judgment in taking their son skiing. This sets up the tension that immediately follows and continues until the resolution of the story.
10. The irony Wolff uses shows the unusual relationship of father and son where the son appears to have a much more mature sensibility and rationale than his father, the more daring and reckless of the two.