

Literary Analysis Series #2 – Focus on Vocabulary

After reading through the story, even if you didn't catch every detail you should know basically what happens by whom and to whom. That's a start!

The next step in your Analysis is to go through the piece [or the section of it you are working on] and make sure that you understand it. That means, of course, VOCABULARY. A somewhat tedious task, I know. Good news is – you will never AGAIN have to learn any of these words! You will, inevitably get to the point of not much needing this step at all any more. But that's probably not today.

Remember those UNDERLINES you made in Step #1? Now is the time to deal with them.

On the OFF-chance you didn't have to underline a SINGLE word – WELL DONE YOU! You can skip this article and head off to Step #3. BUT BEFORE YOU GO...are you really REALLY sure not a SINGLE word was unfamiliar to you? Have another look. In all aspects of language – reading, writing and speaking – an increased vocabulary is a good investment.

Oh sure, I could go on and on about root words, stems, endings, prefixes....and yes, they count. But let's keep our goals in mind!

There are three goals in working with vocabulary based on a piece of Literature. In order of Importance they are:

1. Understand the phrase or sentence or verse in which the word appears
2. Find out the meaning[s] of the word
3. Remember the word for the next time you see it

I've created a vocabulary study form to go with this lesson. It is not meant for young readers just learning ABOUT words and reading, but for you, a student of Literature, who wants to acquire new words based on your reading. You can download the form [HERE](#). Below is a single line of the form, used to study one word.

Word	Line #	Definition
	Part of Speech	
	Guess: + -	Re-Write with a synonym



The first the boxes are for the word itself, the line # where it appears [or paragraph/page] and its part of speech. Those three things don't depend on the meaning of the word.

The next box is marked "Guess." Think a bit about the word, and especially about the overall meaning of the 3 or 4 sentences around it. DO guess the meaning – just jot down a POSSIBLE synonym at least.

Now you probably know that many words have both a MEANING and a 'connotation', a subtext. Consider "hat", "cap", and "bonnet." Each one MEANS a garment worn on the head. But the subtext is unmistakable. Under NO circumstances would we say that the baseball star wore a green bonnet! So now, even before you KNOW the word, you can guess if it has a 'good' connotation or a 'negative' one. Just circle the + or – next to your guess.

Next, predictably enough, you look up the word in a dictionary. There are hundreds, thousands of them in print and online. Use your favorite. Let me suggest dictionary.com for you. I use it and there are several excellent features available including hearing the word and a free translator. In my line of work I use both of them often! Write the definition[s] in the box. If there are a lot of different definitions, think about which one 'fits' in the phrase best and write the #1 definition and the most applicable one in the box.

At this point we have accomplished the #2 goal – that of finding the meaning of the word.

Now you have to search the dictionary and/or thesaurus for a synonym of the word that will fit back into the context of the story you are studying. When you have one – re-write the sentence or phrase or verse with the synonym in it in the appropriate box. Take a moment to think. Does the entire paragraph make sense now? IF it does you are doing FINE. If it doesn't are there other words you should study? Maybe a different meaning of your word will work better? Keep at it until you feel confident you understand the word and the surrounding context. Oh, and how close was your guess? Do you agree with your +/- subtext guess still? I promise you will get MUCH better at those as you practice.

Speaking of practice...what of Goal #3? Your BEST tool for learning, practicing, and retaining vocabulary words is FLASH CARDS. Just making the cards is a good technique. Add to that reviewing them from time to time and you have a POWERFUL memory device.

You can, of course, make them yourself. But! If you want to study vocabulary cards online dictionary.com has a nice Flashcard capability. Another site I use is <http://zel.me/fc> where you can make flashcards for ANY material you need to learn and then download and print them.



I can't stress enough that the main difference between great readers and reluctant readers is vocabulary, so do a bit of work now and save yourself stress and drudgery forever!

Jo Karabasz

[[if you are working along with this series – go to Literary Analysis Step 2 – Example – “The Lady, or the Tiger”]]

