

How to Read Literature Like a Professor is a 2003 book by Thomas Foster. In it, Foster describes methods and strategies for interpreting the concepts and themes in classical literature so readers can better understand their merits.

A 3 Minute Summary of the 15 Core Lessons

#1 Reading Well Has a Language

Foster asserts that there are right and wrong ways to read serious literature. Reading literature the correct way will allow you to distill its themes and concepts much more successfully and quickly than when you read lighter fiction or literature. This is the heart of the apparent discrepancy between professors and their students.

#2 Three Key Elements

Foster claims that there are three key elements to the “language of reading”. These three elements, when combined, allow you to quickly and accurately discern the meaning of the text and apply it to your own understanding of its broader concepts.

#3 Memory

The first key element of the language of reading is memory. Clever readers will draw on the gut reaction of finding a piece of text familiar and draw on real comparisons between their current text and other books they may have read in the past. This allows a greater understanding of the current text by focusing on what you already know about the subject at hand.

#4 Symbols

The second element of the language of reading is symbols. Symbols are much more than their surface-level appearances or attributes. They can stand for certain events or concepts, and interpreting symbols correctly will allow you to get a fuller picture of a story or text.

#5 Patterns

Finally, all clever readers will focus on patterns in any text they consume. Patterns are not meaningless details that pop up again and again, but they are used to communicate hidden messages from authors or to illustrate overall themes of the book.

#6 Most People Are Shallow Readers

Foster claims that most people don't follow the above three elements in the language of reading and are in fact shallow readers. This means that they only take the surface level details of the text into account rather than ruminating on the actual details or depth of a story. As a result, they may have subpar understandings of certain texts and not comprehend what a professor tries to teach them in a literature class.

#7 The Quest Structure is Common

Foster points out that one of the most common structures and novels and stories is the quest structure. This is also called the hero's journey, but in a nutshell, it contains someone (the titular quester) trying to find or do something in facing challenges along

the way. Comprehending this basic skeletal structure will help you understand more complicated texts.

#8 Five Basic Parts to a Hero's Journey

While there are other books that break down the hero's journey in more detail, Foster goes over the five most basic elements. The first of these is the quester him or herself, who is often the protagonist or the main character of the story. This is the person who will change your face challenges in the pursuit of a particular goal or desire.

#9 Destination

The next big part of the hero's journey is the destination. This is the endpoint for the entire quest or journey and is often thematically consistent with the larger concepts or ideas within the story at hand. Note that the destination can also be an object, a person, or a task that is fulfilled; it does not necessarily need to be a physical location.

#10 A Reason to Go

Most protagonists in hero's journeys don't go on their journey for just any reason. They require a stated and serious reason to leave their comfortable life behind and pursue a difficult task. This is also often called the inciting incident.

#11 Challenges Along the Way

The fourth major element of a hero's journey is the challenges the protagonist will face. These can be either interior or exterior, physical or mental, and can represent different roadblocks to the character's goals or desires. Oftentimes, these challenges will be artificially constructed in order to be particularly hard for the protagonist of the story rather than generic difficulties, although it heavily depends on the story.

#12 A Revelation

Most hero's journeys also incorporate an unexpected or mind-changing revelation at the end or climax of the tale. This revelation can be about the world of the story or the protagonist himself, which often deals with an interior change or serious character growth. The revelation often coincides with the external climax or final battle, particularly with lighter or more classic adventure stories.

#13 Look for Universal Symbols

Foster stresses the importance of looking for universal messages or symbols in books, as many authors use the same shared cultural symbolism to get across complex ideas without lots of words. Many authors come from the same culture, which means they draw on the same cultural understanding of certain symbolic images and ideas for communication.

#14 Intertextuality

The above concept is explained in greater detail by means of intertextuality. This describes the idea that all texts depend on one another and technically build on one another over time. A great example of this is a storm brewing on the horizon. It is rarely

just a weather event in a story with thought-out symbolism; instead, it's often a herald of difficulties or challenges to come for the protagonist.

#15 Christian Symbolism is Heavily Predominant

Foster also makes the claim that, at least in Western culture, Christian symbolism makes up some of the most predominant symbolic imagery and ideas that make it into most classical stories and modern tales. Christian symbolism is, therefore, something that every serious reader should seek to understand in order to better interpret the stories that make up our shared cultural framework. This does not necessarily mean that you need to study the Bible or become a Christian yourself: just that you need to know what inter-textual ideas most authors draw on either consciously or subconsciously.

Top 10 Quotes from How to Read Literature Like a Professor

1. "Education is mostly about institutions and getting tickets stamped; learning is what we do for ourselves. When we're lucky, they go together. If I had to choose, I'd take learning."
2. "Always" and "never" are not words that have much meaning in literary study. For one thing, as soon as something seems to always be true, some wise guy will come along and write something to prove that it's not."
3. "We - as readers or writers, tellers or listeners - understand each other, we share knowledge of the structures of our myths, we comprehend the logic of symbols, largely because we have access to the same swirl of story. We have only to reach out into the air and pluck a piece of it."
4. "Reading...is a full-contact sport; we crash up against the wave of words with all of our intellectual, imaginative, and emotional resources."
5. "Reading is an activity of the imagination, and the imagination in question is not the writer's alone."
6. "So what did you think the devil would look like? If he were red with a tail, horns, and cloven hooves, any fool could say no."
7. "Rain falls on the just and the unjust alike."
8. "Real people are made out of a whole lot of things—flesh, bone, blood, nerves, stuff like that. Literary people are made out of words."
9. "If a story is no good, being based on Hamlet won't save it."
10. "Everything is a symbol of something, it seems, until proven otherwise."