

How to Write an Account of a Novel

What is an 'account'?

A short account is like a review. It should give a short description of the novel and no more. It should cover the main subjects of **plot, characters, narration, themes** and **style**. There is no need to go into detail. It may help the reader decide if they want to read the novel or not. Or it may show an examiner or a tutor that you, as a student, have read and understood the main points of the novel.

An example

You are going to read a short account of Jane Austen's novel *Pride and Prejudice*. Use the exercises below (1-4) to help you analyse the text.

Focus on information

- 1 **Before you read the account, look at the list below. Tick what you think is the most important information about the novel. Remember, this is a short introduction to the novel, so it isn't possible to include all the information.**

- title
- author
- genre
- publication date
- author's other works
- historical context
- names of main characters
- description of the main characters
- description of minor characters
- quotes from the text
- narrative style
- description of the plot
- explanation of subplots
- main themes
- description of the author's style

2 Read the account and check your answers to 1.

- 1 *Pride and Prejudice* is the second of Jane Austen's six novels. The novel describes how Lizzy Bennet meets her future husband, Mr Darcy, but before the two of them can fall in love and be truly happy, Mr Darcy must learn to overcome his pride, and Lizzy must learn to overcome her prejudice.
- 2 Both the timeframe and the setting of the novel are limited. The plot focuses on a year in the life of the Bennet family, and all the action takes place in the homes and gardens of the Bennets and their friends and family. The action in the novel focuses on social meetings and events, and the relationships between the various characters.
- 3 A third person narrator tells the story through Lizzy's eyes. We, the readers, see both the characters and events as she sees them. We, too, are not sure about Darcy at the beginning and are happy to believe the stories that Wickham tells about him. We are as surprised as Lizzy is when Darcy first proposes marriage to her, and as embarrassed as she is when her mother continually makes a fool of herself in public.
- 4 The theme of marriage arises in all Austen's novels. In provincial England in the 18th century, making the right marriage was important, not only for personal reasons, but for financial and social reasons too. Mrs Bennet represents a shallow, materialistic attitude to marriage. She is only interested in the social status that marriage gives. She does not think about the couple's chances of future happiness. Lizzy is the opposite. She has learnt from the mistakes of her parents and she does not want a marriage that is not based on respect, understanding and love. This is the ideal marriage in Austen's world: a marriage with social and financial stability and where both partners love and respect each other equally.
- 5 Throughout the novel Austen makes fun of the personality of Mrs Bennet and those of other similar characters. Characters such as Lady Catherine de Bourgh and Mr Collins show their shallow attitudes through their actions and words, as does Mrs Bennet. We laugh at them, but we also judge them. They are seen as silly, self-important and vain. They are more interested in what people think of them, than in the true value of people and things.
- 6 The novel is as much about truth and honesty, as it is about love. Both Lizzy and Darcy have to learn to judge – and love – people for their true worth, rather than judging them through the eyes of society. This is a theme that is as important today as it was 200 hundred years ago. I believe that the strength of the novel is its ability to tell a story that deals with the basic problems facing people and society across the ages.

Focus on organisation**3 Read the account again and match the paragraphs (1-6) to the summary of their contents (a-f).**

- | | |
|--|-------|
| a) details about the plot | _____ |
| b) a discussion of style | _____ |
| c) a personal reaction to the novel | _____ |
| d) a discussion of the main theme | _____ |
| e) an introduction to the plot and the main characters | _____ |
| f) details about the narrator and narrative style | _____ |

4 Read the account again and answer the questions below. Underline the sections in the account that help you answer the questions.

- 1 Who are the main characters?
- 2 What happens to them?
- 3 How long does the story last?
- 4 Where does it take place?
- 5 Who tells the story?
- 6 Whose viewpoint do we see?
- 7 What is the main theme?
- 8 What does the novel say about the main theme?
- 9 What literary device is described?
- 10 What does the writer most like about the novel?

Focus on useful language

1 Find the phrases (1-8) in the account and match them to their functions (a-h).

- | | |
|--|---------------------------------------|
| 1 The novel describes how ... | a describing the novel's main message |
| 2 The plot focuses on ... | b giving information about viewpoint |
| 3 The action takes place in ... | c discussing the author's style |
| 4 The narrator tells the story through ... | d explaining a character's role |
| 5 Mrs Bennet represents ... | e introducing the main storyline |
| 6 Throughout the novel the author ... | f giving your opinion |
| 7 The novel is as much about ... as it is about ... | g giving details about the setting |
| 8 I believe that ... | h explaining the timeframe |

2 Use the expressions in bold in exercise 1 above to complete the sentences below.

- 1 The white whale _____ the uncontrollable power of nature.
- 2 Most of the action _____ on board the *Pequod*.
- 3 *Our Mutual Friend* _____ a dead man's will influences and changes the lives of John Harmon and his friends.
- 4 _____ uses effective imagery which creates the atmosphere of dirt and decay surrounding the Chancery.
- 5 _____ *Rebecca* is one of the great love stories of all time.
- 6 Pip _____ in the first person.
- 7 The plot _____ the childhood experiences of young Pip.
- 8 *Moby Dick* _____ revenge and madness _____ the power of nature.

3 Reorder the words in the sentences below.

1 main have not one *Middlemarch* character does

2 various follows plot the people stories the of

3 guides third an stories us narrator through the person

4 *Middlemarch* in themes are many there

5 marriage important of the one most is

6 whaling ship of story tells the *Moby Dick*

7 sea action place at most the takes of

8 symbol the things white whale many of a

4 Underline the phrases above that you could use in an account of another novel.**Writing task**

Now it's your turn. You're going to write an account of a novel you've read recently. The exercises below will take you through the process step by step. They will help you make decisions about:

- 1 what information to include
- 2 what order to include it in
- 3 the language you need to put your ideas across

Focus on information

1 Decide on the novel you are going to write about and then write notes in the table below.

Title	_____
Author	_____
Genre	_____
Historical context	_____ _____
main characters	_____ _____
minor characters	_____ _____
Plot	_____ _____
sub plot/s	_____ _____
Narrative style	_____ _____
main theme	_____ _____
other themes	_____ _____
author's style	_____ _____
literary devices used	_____ _____

2 Look at your notes and decide what information you are going to include. Remember, you can't include everything. You need to choose the information that you think is the most important and most interesting.

Focus on organisation

- 3 Look at the paragraph plan below. Look at your notes again and decide what you are going to say in each paragraph. Remember that you want to keep your account short, so don't try to include too much information.

Main focus	Notes on contents
1 introduction	title: _____ author: _____ main characters: _____ one sentence summary of plot: _____ anything else? _____
2 plot	timeframe: _____ setting: _____ action: _____ anything else? _____
3 narrator	narrative style: _____ _____ point of view: _____ _____
4 main theme	one sentence summary of main theme: _____ _____ examples from the novel: _____ _____
5 style	main aspect of style: _____ _____ example from novel: _____ _____
6 personal response	what aspect of the novel appeals most to you? _____ _____ _____ _____

Focus on language

4 Take time to do the following. Use the useful language section above to help you:

- write a one sentence summary of the main story
- write a sentence describing the timeframe and setting
- write a one sentence summary of the narrative style
- write a sentence introducing the main theme
- write a sentence explaining the author's style
- write a sentence explaining your feelings about the novel

Writing

5 Now you are ready to write your account. Use the sentences in exercise 4 as the basis for your six paragraphs. You may want to change them a little to fit in with the other points you want to make. As you write your account, keep looking back to your paragraph plan (exercise 3 above) to make sure you're including all the necessary information. Remember, this is just a short account, you are not expected to write everything you know about the novel!

6 When you have finished, read through your account and imagine that you know nothing about the novel that you have described. Answer the following questions.

- Does the account give a clear picture?
- Would you like to know more?
- Would you be interested in reading the novel?