What is the difference between reading like a student and reading like a professor?

Students:
- Focus mostly on the plot and characters in a story.
- Respond to the story first on an emotional level.

Professors:
- Focus mostly on memory, symbol, and pattern in the story.
- Accept the emotional response, but look deeper to find the universal truth displayed.

The combination of using memory, identifying symbols, and recognizing patterns allows a reader to analyze literature in a new light—the way a professor would. If you ignore memory, symbols, and patterns in literature, you will not be able to appreciate a book for everything that it says between the lines.

This book teaches you:
- The conventions of literature: Character types, plot structures, themes, symbols, archetypes, and more.
- The skills to find and analyze them on your own.

**Memory**

When you read with a powerful memory, you actively look for how the text corresponds to other literary works. You mentally flip through the things you've read before and look for similarities (or differences) to the structure, theme, or characters of what you're reading now.

For example, as you watch the movie *Pale Rider* starring Clint Eastwood, you might be reminded of the movie *Shane* from 1953.

These similarities are what critics call intertextuality. Authors use references and parallels to draw connections to previous literary works.

Intertextuality in literature deepens the meaning of the text by drawing on the reader's expectations.

**Example of Memory: Going After Cacciato**

The novel has three interwoven stories: one, the history of protagonist Paul Berlin's war experiences; two, an imagined trip to Paris in search of their fellow soldier Cacciato; three, the present night in which Paul Berlin is remembering the first story and inventing the second.

In one part of Berlin's fantasy trip, he and his squad fall down a hole in the road. They end up in an otherworldly network of tunnels. One character even states that they need to fall back up. As a reader, you are invited to relate this part of the story to when Alice falls down the rabbit hole in Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*.

Now that you have made that connection, your reading of the story will be nuanced by that awareness. You might expect that the tunnels the characters find themselves in will be some kind of wonderland for them.

**Memory: Sacred Texts**

In order to truly read literature like a professor, you need to be on the lookout for intertextual references to "sacred texts," like Shakespeare, classic fairy tales, ancient myths, and the Bible.

Using recognizable themes or plots from these sacred texts gives the author the chance to use the reader's associations to say more in their own work with fewer words. And for the reader, recognition of these references enhances the experience of reading current literature, because the modern stories share in the power of the sacred text.

How authors utilize the common sacred texts:

**Shakespeare**
Shakespeare's work provides a source against which writers can challenge ideas and struggle through timeless questions.

For example, Athol Fugard's play "Master Harold" ... and the Boys uses Shakespeare's Henry IV, Part II as a device. Fugard mimics Shakespeare's plot—in this version, Harry must turn away his black friends in an effort to grow up and become responsible. Fugard invites his audience to question whether choosing to regress toward racism is really the mark of growing up. He challenges Shakespeare's values, and gives the audience the chance to do the same.

Fairy Tales

Fairy tales are popular choices for authors to reference because they're an assumed body of knowledge. Most readers can relate to and recognize the classic fairy tales.

For example, an author could adapt the plot of “Hansel and Gretel” in their work. The story of children far away from home, lost in a forest, and captured by some evil witch in a strange place—you've probably seen a version of this in something you've read.

Myth

References to mythology in literature show that the story goes beyond what is on the page—it is really a story about humanity's noble yet primal motivations.

For example, Derek Walcott's Omeros uses parallels to The Iliad and The Odyssey to tell the story of a community of Caribbean fishermen. He knows this community intimately and wants to tell their story in a way that highlights their struggles, as well as their triumphs. The narrative guide of the classic myths allows Walcott to show the nuances of the fishermen's condition by associating their story with an ancient epic.

The Bible

Many authors use the Bible to highlight the differences between religious...

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Here's a preview of the rest of Shortform's How to Read Literature Like a Professor summary:

How to Read Literature Like a Professor Summary How to Read Literature Like a Professor Guide What It Means to Read Literature Like a Professor

A literature professor is always looking for meaning and significance beyond the text of a novel, poem, or play. Here's an example:

In the play A Raisin in the Sun by Lorraine Hansberry, the protagonist, Walter Lee Younger, moves his African American family into an all-white community. A white man named Mr. Linder comes to Walter with an offer: He wants to buy the Younger family out of their claim on the house. Although the offer is insulting, Walter Lee is forced to consider it. This is one of the play's primary dramas.

Imagine you've just read the play. Would you be surprised to hear your literature professor say that Mr. Lindner is the devil? Would you have come to that conclusion on your own?

If not, that's okay. That means that you, the student, and your professor have read the same story, but not in the same way. Your professor has had practice analyzing literature and finding its conventions and codes. She has the skills to remember
instances of bargaining with the devil in other stories, and connect that pattern to Mr. Lindner through common plot devices and themes.

So what is the difference between reading like a student and reading like a...
One problem with symbols is that they can mean so many different things to different readers. In fact, it is the mark of a great piece of literature when readers and scholars can come to different, even conflicting, interpretations.

(The exception to this rule is allegory. Allegories convey a particular message by associating a symbol with one specific meaning.

• Example: Paul Bunyon's *The Pilgrim's Process* is an allegory in which the main character, Christian, is traveling to the Celestial City. This is meant to directly convey the devout Christian getting to heaven. There is no ambiguity that allows for a different understanding of the story.)

Another problem with symbols is that different authors can use the same symbol in many different ways. For example, let's look at three different rivers from three different authors:

1. Mark Twain uses the Mississippi River in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* to symbolize both danger and safety. Although Huck and Jim are mostly safe from the dangers they flee on land,...

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Jerry McPhee

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How to Read Literature Like a Professor Summary

How to Read Literature Like a Professor Guide Symbols Part II: The Symbolic Significance of Setting

Every good story needs a setting, the time and place in which the story takes place. In literature, the setting is not only the backdrop for the story but an integral part of the story itself. The setting of a particular story informs the mood of the story, the attitude of the characters, and the presentation of the themes.

Weather

When you begin reading a poem or a novel, take notice right away of any weather that is mentioned. Weather is never only about weather in a piece of literature.

Weather can also act as:

• **Plot device:** The weather can force characters to do something, such as come together to get out of the rain.
• **Atmosphere enhancement:** The mood of the story is indicated by the weather conditions.
• **Democratic element:** All characters, just or unjust, are affected equally by the weather.

The most popular weather condition employed by authors in literature is rain. *Rain* has many associations that you should be aware of as a reader:

• **Drowning:** Humans are land creatures, and as such have a fear of drowning. When an author employs rain in association with flooding or drowning, she speaks to the reader's primal...

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Shortform Exercise: Recognize and Interpret Symbols

Geography influences a novel's atmosphere, characters, and plot. Practice using the analytical skills you've learned in this chapter.
to analyze geographical symbols.

In Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, a young boy, Huck, and an escaped slave, Jim, travel down the Mississippi River on a raft.

In what ways is traveling into the Deep South thematically relevant for Huck and, especially, Jim?

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**How to Read Literature Like a Professor Summary How to Read Literature Like a Professor Guide Symbols Part III: Actions as Symbols**

For most readers, recognizing objects as symbols comes easy, but it can be quite difficult to understand that actions can act as symbols, too.

Authors choose the actions that happen in a narrative carefully—each action must serve the plot in a novel, but some will also illuminate larger themes.

**Violence**

Violence is prevalent in literature, but it is important to know that acts of violence are always a symbol for some greater kind of suffering. The range of possibilities for what that suffering might be is too large to generalize. The answer might be psychological, spiritual, historical, social, or political.

- The exception to this rule is mystery novels. In a mystery, the murder is clear-cut because the complexities lie in the uncovering of the truth.

In literary violence, the complexities lie in the significance or thematic meaning of the violence itself.

There are two kinds of violence in literature:

1. A specific harm that characters inflict on each other or themselves
2. General harm that is caused by the author as part of the narrative

The only real difference between these two kinds of literary violence is that **in the second type,...**

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**How to Read Literature Like a Professor Summary How to Read Literature Like a Professor Guide Patterns Part I: Know the Archetypes, Find Them Everywhere**

We’ve already covered this notion, but it is worth saying again: All literature exists as part of one big story. Nothing is really new. Although every piece of literature is different, it still interacts with every written work that came before it. In fact, even if an author attempts to avoid referencing any other novels, that avoidance is an interaction in itself.

- Example: Imagine you are directing a western movie. If your hero is the silent type, he will remind the audience of John Wayne. If he’s a big talker, he’s more of a James Garner-type. If you have one of each, your movie will be reminiscent of *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*.

One of the main benefits of the one big story is the emergence of archetypes. “Archetype” really just means “pattern,” or the original on which that pattern was based. No one knows the original use of archetypes, just like no one knows exactly where ancient myths began. They predate written history.

It doesn’t really matter where they come from, when they began, or how often they’re used. Archetypes grow in strength with each use in literature. They create an aha! moment for the reader—a satisfying moment when we...
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**Shortform Exercise: Identify the Quest Archetype**

Every quest narrative includes a quester, a place to go, a stated reason to go there, challenges along the way, and a real mission that reveals itself in time. Practice identifying these elements in a story.

One day, a young boy named Kip agrees to go to the grocery store to buy a loaf of bread for his mom. He chooses to ride his old, one-speed bicycle, of which he is deeply ashamed. When he gets to the store, he is humiliated to see the girl he loves, Karen, in the parking lot. She's hanging out with a guy named Tony, who has an expensive sports car. Moments later, in the bread aisle, Tony decides to enlist for the military. He has learned his lesson: that he'll never get what he wants in this town, where people only care about how much money your family has.

In the box below, identify the following elements in this quest narrative: The quester, the place to go, the reason to go there, the obstacles faced, and the self-knowledge acquired:

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**How to Read Literature Like a Professor Summary How to Read Literature Like a Professor Guide Patterns Part II: The Injured Character Archetype**

In life, physical deformities, illnesses, and handicaps are simply that. In literature, however, authors use maladies like scars, diseases, and blindness to enhance the themes at issue in their work.

**Scars and Disabilities**

You should see physical imperfections in literature in symbolic terms to classify a character as different. When you read of a character with a physical marking or handicap in a novel, know that the author means to call attention to the nature of the character or a thematic concern of the novel.

In Elizabethan literature, physical deformity was equated with moral or spiritual depravity. As politically incorrect as it might seem now, a character with a handicap was a sign of God's displeasure in an Elizabethan novel.
Example: Shakespeare's Richard III had scoliosis, an external symbol of his morally twisted ways.

Things have changed in modern literature. Not all physical maladies should be read as a representation of moral shortcomings. Instead, you should see physical markings as:

- **Indication of the damage the character has endured in life**
  - Example: In Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Sethe's back is covered in a network of...

### Irony Changes Everything

An intelligent reader will always be on the lookout for irony in literature—when an author plays against expectations. When irony is in play in a novel, every other chapter in this book is irrelevant, because the author will invert the typical meanings of symbols and archetypes.

Some modern writers, like James Joyce and Angela Carter, deal almost exclusively with irony. So as you become more familiar with their work, you will be ready for them to go against your conventional expectations. But how can you spot irony in other works of literature?

If there is a disconnect between your expectation of a story and the reality of how it plays out, it is most likely ironic. The conversation between the expectation and reality deepens the meaning of the work.

Think of irony like jazz music. Before a soloist takes off on a jazzy improvisation, he begins by playing the melody straight. That way, when he starts riffing on that melody, the audience can hear how his changes enhance and play against the basic melody. That kind of dual hearing is what irony does in literature. Our expectations are the melody, and the irony is the solo.

Some kinds of...

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### How to Read Literature Like a Professor Summary How to Read Literature Like a Professor Guide Your Turn to Read Like a Professor

On your own time, read the story “The Garden Party” by Katherine Mansfield.

(Shortform note: You can find the story [online for free here.](#))

When you've finished the story, answer the questions below. Read carefully and practice all of the strategies for interpretation that you've learned from this book. Write or type your answers to stay accountable, and don't look at any other sources for help.

1. What does the story signify? That is, what do you interpret as the story's meaning?
2. Why do you think that? What elements of the story gave you that interpretation?

Once you've answered the questions for yourself, compare your own answers with some of these other interpretations:

- The story is about the indifference of the family in the story to the working class living down the hill.
- The story is about the young girl's guilt over having a party while others mourn, and the indifference of the upper class to the struggle of others.
- The story uses the metaphor of birds and flight...

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