Elements of Fiction

**Fiction** is writing that tells a story from a writer’s imagination. Fiction has these basic parts:

- **Setting** is the time and place of the story.
- **Plot** is a series of events in a story. The plot has a **conflict**, or problem, that the characters face. The conflict starts a series of events and then rises to a **climax**. The climax is the point at which the action is most intense. The **resolution** is how the story ends.
- **Characters** are the individuals who take part in the story.
- **Dialogue** is what characters say. Sometimes the characters speak in an **idiom** or **dialect**. This is a way of speaking that is common to a group or region. **Idiomatic expressions** are phrases that mean something different from the combined meanings of the individual words.
- **Point of view** is the viewpoint of the character who tells the story. A story told by a character involved in the action is in **first-person point of view**. A story told by someone outside the story is in **third-person point of view**.
- **Theme** is the message about life or human nature. A **universal theme** applies to people everywhere.

### Types of Fiction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Short story</td>
<td>brief work of fiction</td>
<td>“The Monkey’s Paw”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Novel</td>
<td>long work of fiction</td>
<td><em>Girl in Hyacinth Blue</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Novella</td>
<td>work of fiction that is shorter than a novel but longer than a short story</td>
<td><em>The Old Man and the Sea</em> by Ernest Hemingway</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Elements of Nonfiction

Nonfiction is writing that gives information about a subject. A nonfiction writer may write about his or her opinion about a subject. Nonfiction has these basic parts:

- **Tone** is the writer’s attitude toward the subject. It is shown with his or her choice of words and details.

- **Perspective** is the writer’s point of view, including his or her opinions.

- **Purpose** is the writer’s reason for writing. A writer’s purpose may be to persuade, to inform, or to entertain an audience.

There are two main types of nonfiction: literary nonfiction and informational text.

- **Literary nonfiction texts** combine personal examples and ideas with facts. One example is a personal essay.

- **Informational texts** may present facts, argue an opinion, or explain how to complete a task. One example is a newspaper article.
VOCABULARY WARM-UP

Word List A
Study these words. Then, complete the activities that follow.

**auctioned** [AWK shuhnd] v. sold in a public sale to the highest bidder
- *My mother plans to bid on the table that will be auctioned tomorrow.*

**chronology** [kruh NAH luh jee] n. the order of events
- *A timeline can help you understand the chronology of historic events.*

**defiance** [di FY uhns] n. resistance to authority; refusal to conform
- *The runner showed her defiance by refusing to follow the coach’s orders.*

**entailed** [en TAYLD] v. involved; required
- *Becoming a lawyer entailed many years of long and difficult study.*

**eroded** [i ROH did] v. wore away; caused to decrease
- *My cousin eroded my trust in him when he told me a lie.*

**locales** [loh KAHLZ] n. locations, especially places connected with events
- *The story is set in two locales: a shopping mall and a graveyard.*

**whim** [HWIM] n. a sudden fancy or impulse
- *We passed the museum and on a whim we decided to go inside.*

**yield** [YEELD] v. to produce
- *Studying carefully for a test is likely to yield a passing grade.*

Exercise A
Fill in each blank in the paragraph below with an appropriate word from Word List A. Use each word only once.

I forget some of the details, but I still recall the basic [1] ________ of events. One Sunday last year, my grandfather and I were bored. On a sudden [2] ________, we decided to clean out the attic. The job [3] ________ sorting through a lot of junk. Then, I saw a trunk covered with stickers from interesting [4] ________ from around the world. “I bet there’s a treasure in this thing,” he said. My confidence in him was [5] ________ when we opened the trunk and it was empty. “It’s only a big box,” I said, stamping my foot to show my [6] ________ of his optimism. Of course, grandfather was right. The antique trunk will be [7] ________ to the highest bidder next week. The dealer expects the sale will [8] ________ more than five hundred dollars!
The life of Dutch painter Johannes Vermeer remains a mystery. Historians identify only basic dates in the chronology of his life, including his birth in 1632, his marriage in 1653, and his death in 1675. Vermeer is remembered as the painter of about 35 paintings. Time has eroded the details of Vermeer's life, but his reputation has been built up by this small collection of wonderful masterpieces.

Vermeer's father became an art dealer the year before Vermeer was born. Paintings are sometimes auctioned to the highest bidder; other times they are sold by a dealer at a set price. Because his father bought and sold art, it is probable that Vermeer's youth entailed plenty of chances to observe and study paintings.

Most of Vermeer's works show everyday people in common situations. In several paintings, a woman reads or writes a letter. The locales are mostly interiors, often with a window nearby. Vermeer creates a delicate sense of light that many viewers find magical. Vermeer is also well known for his masterful placement of objects. Nothing is left to whim or chance. Every detail, from a single earring to a milk jug, is carefully selected and positioned.

Close inspection of Vermeer's paintings can yield plenty of information about the way he used paint to create his rich illusions. In some paintings, he applied the paint thickly to build up a heavy surface. In others, he used many layers of paints and transparent glazes. These layers help create depth and light.

Some artists become famous for their defiance of accepted traditions. They boldly toss aside the normal ways of painting and follow their own goals. Instead, Vermeer brought the accepted style to a new height with his careful, shimmering works.
Summary Magdalena is 14 years old and lives in the Netherlands in the middle of the 1600s. Her father is a painter. Magdalena would also like to paint. She does not ask her father to teach her because she is afraid that he will refuse. She is also afraid that she will spend her life doomed to household duties.

Note-taking Guide
Use this series-of-events chain to record what happens to Magdalena in the story.

Beginning Event
Magdalena wishes that she could paint.

Final Outcome
Magdalena could see the towers of the city gates. The neat rows of potato farms and the round shapes of orchard trees stretched before her. She heard the windmill as it turned. She could smell the salty air. The river curled beside the town wall. In any weather, these sights, sounds, and smells gave Magdalena great joy.

Late one afternoon when Magdalena finished the clothes washing and her mother let her go out, she ran from their house by the Nieuwe Kerk across the market square, past van Buyten’s bakery, over two cobbled bridges across the canals, past the blacksmith’s all the way to Kethelstraat and the town wall where she climbed up and up the ochre stone steps, each one as high as her knee, to her favorite spot in all of Delft, the round sentry post. From that great height, oh, what she could see. If only she could paint it.

Up there, high up above the town, she had longings no one in the family knew. No one would ever know them, she thought, unless perhaps a soul would read her face or she herself would have soul enough to speak of them. Wishes had the power to knock the breath out of her. Some were large and throbbing and persistent, some mere pinpricks of golden light, short-lived as fireflies but keenly felt.

Magdalena wished that she had fewer chores and more time for herself. She wished that her brothers and sisters were

1. Nieuwe Kerk means “New Church”; Kethelstraat is a street in the city; Delft is a manufacturing city on the Schie River in the Netherlands.
quieter at home. She wished her hair would shine in the sunlight. She wished to travel the world. She wished her family had enough money to pay its bills. She wished the grocer were kinder to her. She wished to write to someone with love. She wished that her father would truly notice her.

More than all those wishes, she had one pulsing wish that outshone all the others. She wished to paint. Yes, me, she thought, leaning out over the stone wall. I want to paint. This and everything. The world from that vantage point stretched so grandly. Up there, beauty was more than color and shapes, but openness, light, the air itself, and because of that, it seemed untouchable. If only the act of wishing would make her able. Father only smiled queerly when she told him she wanted to paint, just as if she'd said she wanted to sail the seas, which, of course, she also wished, in order to paint what she would see. When she said so, that she wished to paint, Mother thrust into her hands the basket of mending to do.

Magdalena watched her father paint. She did not ask him questions. He rarely spoke. Magdalena wanted to have paints and brushes of her own. She thought of the people she would paint. Then, Magdalena realized that her father would not teach her. Her biggest wish would not come true. She would always have her chores.

One day, Magdalena snapped. She cried out that she hated to mend things. She wanted to make something. The family was shocked. Her father frowned at Magdalena. Magdalena looked at her father quietly. She realized that she loved him. She loved his work.
When that thought lifted her face to his, she saw his cheeks grow softer, as if he noticed her in his house for the first time. He drew her over to the table by the window, brought the sewing basket, placed on her lap her brother’s shirt that needed buttons, adjusted the chair, opened the window, a little more, then less, and discovered that at a certain angle, it reflected her face. “If you sit here mending, I will paint you, Magdalena. But only if you stop that shouting.”

Magdalena posed for her father. As she sat, she noticed colors and shapes. The window panes were like jewels. She saw people in the marketplace selling apples, brooms, and wooden buckets. She knew that other people would think these things were ordinary. To Magdalena, these sights were wonderful.

All that month she did not speak, the occasion too momentous to dislodge it with words. He said he’d paint her as long as she didn’t shout, and so she did not speak a word. Her chest ached like a dull wound when she realized that her silence did not cause him a moment’s reflection or curiosity. When she looked out the corner of her eye at him, she could not tell what she meant to him. Slowly, she came to understand that he looked at her with the same interest he gave to the glass of milk.

Magdalena was afraid that no one would want her painting. No one did. For a time, the picture hung in the kitchen. Later, the family had to move. Her father painted less.
A few years later, he died. Magdalena wished she could paint her father. She did not know how. Her father’s paints and brushes were sold to pay bills. Magdalena gave her picture to the baker to repay the family’s debt.

After her father’s death, Magdalena married a saddlemaker named Nicolaes. They moved to Amsterdam. Twenty years passed.

In 1696, Magdalena’s last living child died. Soon after, Magdalena learned that some of her father’s paintings would be sold at an auction. Magdalena wanted to see whether her painting would be there.

Entering the auction gallery, she was struck again by that keenest of childhood wishes—to make a record not only of what she saw, but how. The distance she’d come from that, and not even a child to show for it! She shocked herself by asking, involuntarily, what had been the point of having lived? Wishing had not been enough. Was it a mistake that she didn’t beg him to teach her? Maybe not. If she’d seen that eventually, with help, she could paint, it might have made the years of birthing and dying harder. But then the birthing and dying would have been painted and the pain given. It would have served a purpose. Would that have been enough—to tell a truth in art?

She didn’t know.

Magdalena looked at her father’s paintings. They reminded her of her family and her childhood. Suddenly she saw her painting. Magdalena felt weak. Looking at her younger self, Magdalena felt joy. She could see the simplicity and hope of the girl in the painting. She wished her husband were there to see it too.
Her painting was put up for sale. Magdalena bid on it. She did not have enough money. The painting was sold to a married couple. After the auction, Magdalena thought about speaking to the couple. She followed them for a while through the rain. She realized that she had nothing to say to them and stopped. As she walked away, Magdalena noticed the color and beauty of the rainy day.

♦ ♦ ♦

She thought of all the people in all the paintings she had seen that day, not just Father’s, in all the paintings of the world, in fact. Their eyes, the particular turn of a head, their loneliness or suffering or grief was borrowed by an artist to be seen by other people throughout the years who would never see them face to face. People who would be that close to her, she thought, a matter of a few arms’ lengths, looking, looking, and they would never know her.
Artful Research
Susan Vreeland

**Summary** Susan Vreeland explains why she does so much research. She also explains how she goes about finding information. What she found helped her write *Girl in Hyacinth Blue*, from which “Magdalena Looking” was taken. She also includes a list of her favorite reference materials.

**Note-taking Guide**
Fill in this cluster diagram to record the types of resources you can use when you research a topic.
A famous Irish writer once sent a letter to his aunt to ask a question. James Joyce wanted to know about climbing over a railing on a certain street in Dublin. Was it easy or risky to do this? He needed this information to write a paragraph. His letter shows that research is important to writers.

Susan Vreeland follows Joyce’s example when she writes. She once asked a friend in France to look at the faces on some statues in Paris. This information helped Vreeland avoid making a silly mistake. Vreeland believes that research gives writers a way to focus their ideas. It also provides details that make stories more interesting. How do writers research for a book?

Early research tends to be scattered, while one searches for the story, but later, usually during or after a first draft when one discovers in the work some needed information, it becomes pinpoint precise. At either time, an array of interesting material, some of it crucial, some merely useable, will emerge—and sometimes leap off the page. The results can be exciting. A single unexpected line can prompt a whole story.

Vreeland learned this while doing research for a book. She found out that Dutch Jews were not allowed to own pigeons in 1941. This fact gave her the idea for the story “A Night Different from All Other Nights.” This story appears in her book *Girl in Hyacinth Blue*.

Vreeland’s book traces the history of a painting by a Dutch artist named Jan Vermeer. Each story shows how the painting affected people at a different moment in history. Vreeland researched six different
time periods. She also had to learn about the Netherlands. By the end of the project, Vreeland had researched seventy-six books.

She read books about history, art, geography, and costumes. She researched World War II, the Jewish religion, the diamond trade, and Dutch superstitions. She read about how windmills are built and the way they work. The details she learned about windmills gave her an important insight about the engineer character in her book.

Vreeland has used many resources while researching and writing her books.

1. Works on history, politics, and social conditions
2. Biography, autobiography, personal narrative, and oral history
3. Geography books
4. Maps
5. Travel books
6. Novels
7. Paintings
8. Children’s and juvenile fiction and nonfiction
9. Interviews and phone calls
10. Travel

So when does one stop researching and start writing? You write when the story comes to life, when it assumes some structure, when you can’t help but start, not when you know everything you’ll need to know. That’s impossible to anticipate before you get into the heart of the writing. You might need to push yourself away from the safer act of research and leap into a first draft.

Don’t get bogged down with fears of historical inaccuracy when writing a first draft. In one of the flood stories in Girl in Hyacinth Blue, the student needs to write a note. He’s in a rowboat. He can’t dip a pen in an inkwell. Did they have pencils in 1717? Look it up later. Keep writing.
Keep the momentum going. If you don’t know what they ate, leave it blank and get down the more important elements of the scene.

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Vreeland warns that fiction writers should never include facts that do not help tell the story. Fiction books should tell about the characters. They are not about research.

Stop to Reflect
Read the bracketed passage. Why do you think Vreeland includes this tip? Why is it important?

Nonfiction
The purpose of nonfiction can be to persuade, to inform, or to entertain. How successful is Vreeland in fulfilling each purpose with this article?
1. **Evaluate:** Are Magdalena’s disappointments because of her **character** and behavior? Or are they because of happenings that are beyond her control? Explain.

2. **Support:** Vreeland writes in “Artful Research” that research helps writers focus and makes stories more interesting and believable. Complete the chart below. Find two passages from “Magdalena Looking” that prove Vreeland’s point. Explain your reason for choosing each passage.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>“Magdalena Looking” Passage</th>
<th>Why You Chose It</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. **Fiction:** Would Magdalena experience the same problem if she lived today? Explain.

4. **Nonfiction:** Think about how Vreeland tells writers to use their research in “Artful Research.” Which part of **nonfiction** is discussed more, exploration of ideas or sharing information? Support your answer.