1. Point and view and narrative technique

One useful way to approach a novel involves asking yourself as you read, "Who's telling the story?" Is it (like the narrator of **Little Dorrit**) some unidentified person or voice, who always uses the gramatical third person -- "he," "she," "they" -- or is it a first-person narrative (like **Great Expectations**) in which the identified speaker relates everything from his or her point of view? Or does the novel unfold as an unusual hybrid, such as **Bleak House**, which a character (Esther Summerson) tells part of the story and an all-knowing narrator tells the rest?

Once you've determined that the novel seems to be told by either a first- or third-person narrator, next decide if this narrator knows absolutely everything about the story and its characters or only some of the things we want (and need) to know. Is the narrator, in other words, an omniscient or a limited narrator? One characteristic of an omniscient narrator is that such a story-teller, unlike any human being who has ever lived, knows what's going on inside the mind of other people (or at least other characters).

Readers almost always identify with the fictional character who relates stories in the first person, but can you tell whether this speaker is reliable or not? Most first-personal narrators are reliable, but a good many are not. Some, such as Swift's Gulliver in Brobdingnag, clearly do not represent the author's views and may even be the butt of satire or other forms of criticism. How can you tell?

2. Plot and narrative structure

Plot is what happens in a story, and **structure** is the order in which the novel presents the plot. Plot and structure converge almost completely in novels, like Trollope's, that start at the chronological beginning and progress to the end. In epics like **The Iliad** and novels like **Absalom! Absalom!**, which begin **in medias res** [in the middle of things] and then use flashbacks to explain what is happening, plot and structure diverge a great deal.

Although it might seem easy to merge plot and structure completely, it is virtually impossible to do so, for even books that at first seem to start at the "very beginning," such as **North and South** and **Great Expectations**, often pause late in the action to provide what in cinema is termed "back-story." Such delayed exposition is particularly common in detective stories or narratives in which a mystery plays an important part.

Every plot and every story has an end as well as a beginning. What effects does the ending have on the way we read a novel or other story?

3. Setting

Where does the action take place? In reading a novel, one almost always learns pretty quickly in what place and time the story unfolds -- in other words, where in time and space the story "is set."

Chronological setting: What does setting a novel several decades earlier than the time of its writing and publication imply? Why did Thackeray place **Vanity Fair** at the time of Waterloo? Why did Dickens place **Little Dorrit** in a time when debtor's prisons still existed? How is setting a story three or four decades back different from setting it three or five centuries earlier?

Place: Although placement in time is obviously very important, many discussions of setting tend to focus on place and on those techniques, such as description and allusion to verifiable facts, that create setting. As you read a work of fiction consider if the author just informs us that the action happens in a specific real place (Manchester), a fictional one (Milton), or merely a general place (an industrial city in the north). Does the novel describe landscape, cities, and interiors in great detail? What does each approach imply about the writer's attitude toward reality (or "the world")? What is the relation of a particular setting to a novel's main characters, and can you imagine them in a different setting. What happens in novels, such as Gaskell's **North and South** and Dickens's **Great Expectations**, when the protagonists appear in a new setting -- and what does that apearance in a new setting have to do with "what the book is about"?

4. Characterization

When you think of it, one of the strangest things about fiction is that authors can make us react to a bunch of words as if they were a real person. These assemblages of language can make us laugh or cry, get us angry or indignant, and even occasionally treat them as more important to us than people we know. The various techniques that create this powerful illusion of a person make up what we call **characterization**. Here are some of the more important of these literary devices:

- **physical description** -- telling us what the character looks like
- **dialogue** -- what the character says
- **physical actions** -- what the character does (particularly in relation to what he or she says or thinks.)
- **thoughts, or metal actions** -- the character's inner life, what the character thinks
- **judgment by others** -- what other characters say and think about this fictional person
- **the narrator's judgement** -- what narrator tells us about the character
- **the author's judgement** -- what the author thinks of the character (sometimes difficult to determine until late in the narrative)

5. Theme vs. Subject

We frequently use the terms theme and subject interchangably, but one of my teachers in college used to urge us to distinguish between the two as a useful means of discussing works of fiction: in his usage **subject** is the general topic or topics the book implicitly discusses, such as, for example, "the condition of the working classes" or "the relations of manufacturers and mill workers." In contrast, **theme** is what the novel implies we should think about such subjects; it's what the book means. **North and South** thus shows that factory workers in mid-Victorian England led harsh lives of deprivation and injustice and that following the assumptions of classical economics led factory owners to mistreat their workers and to consider them almost as a separate, lower species. You'll notice that using the word **theme** in this way also requires using the word **that**, as in "the subject of the work-in-question is nature," but "this work shows [argues/demonstrates/implies] that nature is cruel." The use of **that**, in other words, makes one take a stand and state what one believes a text to mean.