Questions for Evaluating and Understanding Fiction
from Perrine’s Literature, 9th edition

Plot and Structure

1. Who is the protagonist of the story? What are the conflicts? Are they physical, intellectual, moral, or emotional? Is the main conflict between sharply differentiated good and evil, or is it more subtle and complex?
2. Does the plot have unity? Are all the episodes relevant to the total meaning or effect of the story? Does each incident grow logically out of the preceding incident and lead naturally to the next? Is the ending happy, unhappy, or indeterminate? Is it fairly achieved?
3. What use does the story make of chance and coincidence? Are these occurrences used to initiate, to complicate, or to resolve the story? How improbable are they?
4. How is suspense created in the story? Is interest confined to "What happens next?" or are larger concerns involved? Can you find examples of mystery? Of dilemma?
5. What use does the story make of surprise? Are the surprises achieved fairly? Do they serve a significant purpose? Do they divert the reader's attention from weakness in the story?
6. To what extent is this a "formula" story?

Characterization

1. What means does the author use to reveal character? Are the characters sufficiently dramatized? What use is made of character contrasts?
2. Are the characters consistent in their actions? Adequately motivated? Plausible? Does the author successfully avoid stock characters?
3. Is each character fully enough developed to justify its role in the story? Are the main characters round or flat?
4. Is any of the characters a developing character? If so, is the change a large or a small one? Is it a plausible change for such a person? Is it sufficiently motivated? Is it given sufficient time?

Theme

1. Does the story have a theme? What is it? Is it implicit or explicit?
2. Does the theme reinforce or oppose popular notions of life? Does it furnish a new insight or refresh or deepen an old one?

Point of View

1. What point of view does the story use? Is it consistent in its use of this point of view? If shifts are made, are they justified?
2. What advantages has the chosen point of view? Does it furnish any clues as to the purpose of the story?
3. If the point of view is that of one of the characters, does this character have any limitations that affect her or his interpretation of events or persons?
4. Does the author use point of view primarily to reveal or conceal? Is it important information known to the focal character ever unfairly withheld?
Symbol, Allegory, and Fantasy

1. Does the story make use of symbols? If so, do the symbols carry or merely reinforce the meaning of the story?
2. Does the story make use of symbolic settings?
3. Does the story employ allegory? Is the use of allegory clear-cut or ambiguous?
4. Does the story contain any elements of fantasy? If so, what is the initial assumption? Does the story operate logically from this assumption?
5. Is the fantasy employed for its own sake or to express some human truth? If the latter, what truth?

Humor and Irony

1. If the story employs humor, is the humor present merely for its own sake or does it contribute to the meaning?
2. Does the story anywhere use irony of situation? Dramatic irony? Verbal irony? What functions do the ironies serve?

General

1. Is the primary interest of the story in plot, character, theme, or some other element?
2. What contribution to the story is made by its setting? Is the particular setting essential, or could the story have happened anywhere?
3. What are the characteristics of the author’s style? Are they appropriate to the nature of the story?
4. What light is thrown on the story by its title?
5. Do all the elements of the story work together to support a central purpose? Is any part irrelevant or inappropriate?
6. What do you conceive to be the story's central purpose? How fully has it achieved that purpose?
7. Is the story commercial or literary? How significant is the story's purpose?
8. Is the story more or less impressive on a second reading?