



Questions to Ask When Writing Fiction

- **Story Interests:** What are the overall ideas the piece is working toward (grief, family, miscommunication, coming-of-age issues, etc.)? Try completing the sentence: “This story is interested in...” While good fiction does not have a thesis, it’s sometimes helpful for a writer to articulate the larger ideas at stake in a story; those ideas that are not necessarily visible to a writer in the thick of writing. Does your hope for the story match where the story actually goes?
- **Story Arc:** Is there a clear sense of rising action, climax (a deciding moment), and resolution?
- **Showing vs. Telling:** Where are those moments where vivid sensory details and descriptions work especially well to put readers into the story? If showing vs. telling is important anywhere, it’s in fiction. On the other hand, sometimes one sentence of telling amid a sea of showing can do a lot to inform readers.
- **Pacing & Focus:** Is too much time spent in scenes that don’t add anything to the story? Is not enough time spent in scenes that feel very important to the story?
- **Tension/Conflict:** Is there a clear conflict? How can it be made more visible, more complicated?
- **Dialogue:** Is there too much? Too little? Remember that those things left unsaid can be as powerful (if not more) than those things said aloud; what characters are doing or what’s happening around them can do some additional work to build tension or tone in place of dialogue.
- **Point-of-View:** Is the point of view consistent throughout? If there is an omniscient narrator, do you offer more than one perspective throughout, not suddenly on the last page? If narration is first person, does the point of view stay within the limitations of that one perspective? If unsure, ask, “*Would s/he know that?*”
- **Character development:** For each character, ask: can you see this person? Does she or he feel real or complicated enough?
- **Tense:** Is it clear what’s happening when? Are scenes in the far past clearly narrated as such so that readers don’t think it’s happening in the “now” of the story?
- **Descriptions:** Are there any blurry/vague spots? If so, consider free writing for a bit. Take a few minutes to write around in a space that feels unclear or spend time with a character not yet clear (i.e. brainstorm a list of 50 random facts about a character). From a fifteen minute free write, an author might get the one or two lines that put readers in the scene, shows who a character is, or really nails some sensory detail or emotion. Not all these details will go in the story, but they are still important for the writer to know. Also ask: are there any overly clunky descriptions? These can distract from story, especially when describing physical movements of characters. Sometimes, simpler is better.
- **Imagery:** What are the specific images that are being pulled in? Is there an overload of images? If so, try to narrow them down to a system of images that can recur and butt up against one another (mirroring conflict, creating atmosphere).



Questions to Ask When Writing Poetry

- **Direction:** Where is the piece going? Given the actual words on the page, what does the piece seem interested in overall?
- **System of images:** How successful are the images? A reasonable goal is to try to move away from abstraction and from the idea that every poem directly tackles an emotion. Oftentimes, this leaves us with words we can't fully picture like "love" and "the eternal torment of my soul." Go through the poem looking at each image and then determine whether or not you can "see" this image. Beware of overfilling poems with ideas that defy the rules of logic (e.g. rain falling upward).
- **Clarity:** Is everything relatively clear to a reader? Even though a poem is art and art can be or do anything, it's important to establish clarity.
- **Grammar:** Is the poem grammatically correct? Poor grammar can destroy the effect of a poem. Playing with grammar requires expert precision and a heightened awareness of the rules of grammar.
- **Structure:** Think of each line as its own independent unit. How does each line begin and end? What's the last word? Try not to end lines on prepositions, articles, etc. Each line should have the strength to support itself, so you want interesting language in the most important and memorable parts, the beginning and the end.
- **Sound:** When read aloud, is there anything that just sounds out of place?
- **Diction:** What is the vocabulary or world of this poem? Are there any spots where language and word choice seem to drift outside of the style the poem is using overall?
- **Beginnings and endings:** Does the poem begin with an interesting enough choice of imagery/language that we want to keep reading? What about the ending? Is there a sense of closure? Does the poem allude to closure by giving us "stop" language? Images that bring up "stillness?" Does it feel as there is more to be said?