BEGINNING

1 Key concepts for literary study

In this unit, you will:

- consider what is meant by the idea of genre
- explore some initial ideas about narrative
- think about the role of language in literature
- establish initial ideas about representation in literary texts.

1.1 Introduction: the elements of literary study

Your A Level English Literature course will bring you into contact with many of the well-known writers and great ideas of history and contemporary culture. It will enable you to expand your knowledge of literature and develop a set of critical reading, thinking, writing and discussion skills.

During the course, you will develop a detailed knowledge of a number of set literary texts. Through reading these, you will develop your knowledge about aspects of literature in general: the craft of the writer, the response of the reader and the contexts in which literature is written, read and interpreted.

1.1.1 The craft of the writer

You will develop your knowledge about the ways in which literary writers shape meanings, achieve powerful effects and convey messages – and at the same time, you will develop your own skills of written expression, becoming a versatile writer in a variety of forms.

1.1.2 The response of the reader and critic

You will develop your knowledge about the ways in which readers read, respond to and interpret literary texts, as well as about the particular purposes and methods of literary study and criticism. At the same time, you will develop your own skills of critical thinking and discussion.

1.1.3 The contexts of literature

You will develop your knowledge of the history of literature and the social and cultural contexts in which literary texts have been written, read and interpreted over the centuries. You will learn to make connections of many kinds between texts, developing your understanding of the ways in which writers work within, develop and break out of conventions of various kinds, and of the ways in which writers and readers respond to the cultures in which they live and work.

Of course, you already know a certain amount about these topics from your earlier studies of English. As you move into A Level, we hope that this book will help you to make the transition to the more specialised type of study you will encounter at A Level. We hope too that it will prepare you for whatever you go on to do after A Level, whether you go on to university or not, by helping you to attain knowledge and develop the skills to communicate effectively and think critically about the world around you.

1.2 Introducing key concepts for literary study

You will already have been introduced to a variety of ways of thinking about the study of literature. As you now start your A Level studies and develop your independent abilities to work with text, it is useful to think briefly about some key concepts that underpin the study of *any* literary text.

ACTIVITY 1

What do you think literary study is about?

Think back over your study of literature to date, particularly focusing on your most recent studies.

a What do you think is the purpose of studying literature?
b What approaches to studying literature have you experienced?
c What kinds of learning activity did you do?
d What are your preferred ways of studying literature?
e What do you think is the relationship between language and literature in studying English?
f How many texts did you study? What types of text were they?
g How much independence were you given? To what extent were you told what to do?
h How do you expect A Level to be different?

1.3 Genre

At its most basic, genre can be defined as a style or category of art, music, film or literature. Thus a musical composition may be designated as a symphony, a sonata, an overture, a concerto or a song. Each of these is seen as a distinct form of composition in its own right in that it shares certain properties in common with other compositions in the same form. Literature can be viewed in particular ways through genre, and the English Literature B Specification expects students to do this. Literary texts are often defined in the same way, and fall broadly into four categories:

- prose fiction (novels, **novellas**, short stories)
- poetry (both **lyric** and narrative)
- drama (mainly for the stage, but occasionally for the screen – both large and small)
- literary non-fiction (for example, some travel writing, biography, autobiography, memoirs, essays).

These are the main genres on which your study of literature will be based, and as such they are often seen as discrete entities. The picture is not quite as simple as this, however. Subcategories exist within all of these genres. Prose fiction, for instance, can be broken down into many subdivisions.

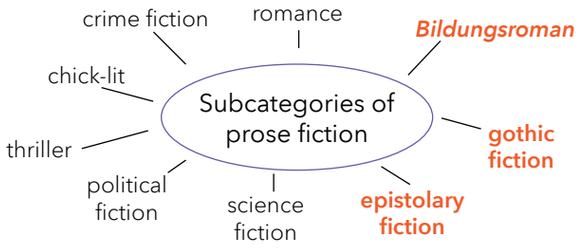
ACTIVITY 2

Subcategories of prose fiction

Think about the prose fiction you've read. It comes in many different shapes, sizes and forms. Jot down a list of these different types of fiction. Think about each type of fiction you identify. What characterises each type and makes it distinct as a category? In what ways do these categories cross over with each other?

You might recognise the types of fiction in Figure 1A, or be able to add others.

Figure 1A



Key terms

novella: a work of prose fiction longer than a short story but shorter than a novel (for example, *Of Mice and Men* or *Animal Farm*)

lyric poetry: song-like poetry, usually with short regular **stanzas**, often expressing strong emotion or personal feelings

stanza: a group of lines in a poem divided from other lines by a blank line

***Bildungsroman*:** a novel dealing with a character's development from childhood into adulthood

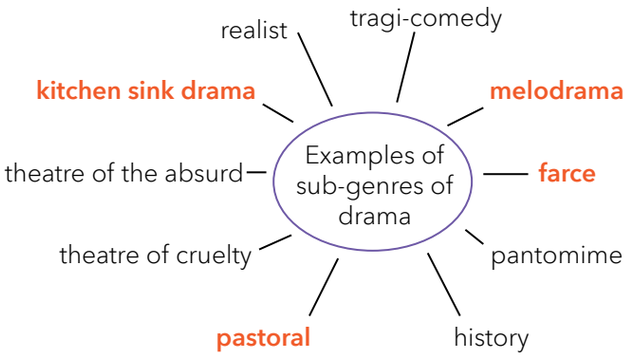
gothic fiction: a form of fiction that frequently deals with horror, the supernatural and socially unacceptable and criminal behaviour

epistolary fiction: a work of prose fiction written mostly or completely in letter form (for example, Tobias Smollett's *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker*)

The various prose fiction categories could also cross over with each other. Both crime and romance, for example, could be epistolary; either could also be a *Bildungsroman*; chick-lit frequently deals with romance; a work of science fiction may also be a thriller.

Drama is also often sub-divided. The main forms are comedy and tragedy, but other sub-forms exist, as shown in Figure 1B.

Figure 1B



Key terms

melodrama: a sensational form of drama with exaggerated characters and exciting events

farce: a kind of energetic comedy that employs fast action and unlikely events

pastoral: dramatic works presenting the society of shepherds or other rural societies, free from the complexity and corruption of city life

kitchen sink drama: a form of drama from the 1950s and 1960s often depicting working- class domestic situations and exploring related social and political issues (for example, John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* and Shelagh Delaney's *A Taste of Honey*)

Shakespeare – arguably the greatest dramatist of all time – recognises this proliferation humorously in *Hamlet* (Act 2, Scene 2) where Polonius makes the observation about the actors arrived at Elsinore, as shown in Text 1A.

Text 1A

The best actors in the world, either for tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral, pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral, tragical-historical, tragical-comical-historical-pastoral, scene individable, or poem unlimited.

Hamlet, Act 2, Scene 2

This list in Text 1A is obviously relevant to Elizabethan drama and sub genres but the range is wider today. While genre recognises formal and functional similarities that connect literary works – novels, for example, share certain common features – it is equally important to note that genre is not a fixed entity. There are significant examples of crossover between the main genres. *The Emperor's Babe* (Bernardine Evaristo), *The Marlowe Papers* (Ros Barber) and *Byrne* (Anthony Burgess), for example, are all novels in verse. *Hawksmoor* (a novel), *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* (a novel) and *Dickens* (a biography) by Peter Ackroyd all include sections written in dramatic form – the former a pastiche of Restoration drama. *Soul Tourists*, also by Bernardine Evaristo, is a combination of prose fiction, poetry and screenplay. Why is this?

Consider the functions of certain types of text and note that there are substantial crossovers between them. Prose fiction, some literary non-fiction, most drama (for both the stage and the screen) and some poetry is narrative in function – the primary purpose is to tell us a story. It is not surprising, therefore, that while the *ways* in which stories are told and the *purposes* for which they are told may differ, there will also be significant shared elements between them. Lyric poetry often seeks to capture in highly figurative and imagistic terms the nature of a specific moment, place or mood, but this may also play a significant part at specific points in both prose fiction and drama.

1.3.1 Features of prose fiction, poetry, drama and literary non-fiction

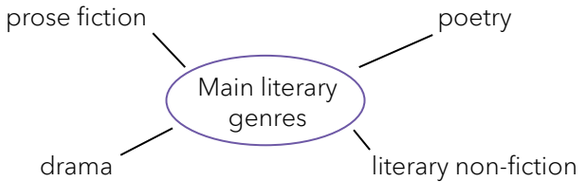
It is important to recognise that literary works take different genre forms and you will certainly have encountered examples of all of the main literary genres in your studies so far.

ACTIVITY 3

Your understanding of genre so far

Look at Figure 1C and think about your existing knowledge of the main literary genres from your studies and personal reading.

Figure 1C



a What unique features can you identify relating to each of these genres?
b What sub-genres have you encountered in each genre?
c In what ways does each genre overlap with others?
d Are there some genres with which you're less familiar?

Developing your familiarity with genres

Everyone has areas of literature where they are less well read. Working with your teacher, set yourself some target reading to develop your familiarity with any genres with which you're less familiar.

1.3.2 Other ways of understanding genre

Genre can also be thought of in broader terms, as a body of work related to a particular theme, or a set of conventions in terms of places, characters, events, and so on. In fact, your A Level course is built around the idea of viewing texts through different features of genre:

- Aspects of tragedy
- Aspects of comedy
- Elements of crime writing
- Elements of political and social protest writing.

A Level studies

Those of you doing A Level will study either aspects of tragedy or aspects of comedy, AND either elements of crime writing or elements of political and social protest writing.

AS Level studies

Those of you doing AS Level will study only aspects of tragedy or aspects of comedy.

Instead of focusing on the fact that a text is a novel, a play or poetry, emphasis is shifted onto the outcomes of the writing (tragedy and comedy) or the focuses of the writing (crime and politics). You will be expected to consider the ways in which writers of prose fiction, poetry and drama have approached these issues, within and across genres. So, as well as studying *Othello* as a play, you'll study it as an example of tragedy; as well as thinking about 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' as a narrative poem, you'll explore it in relation to crime writing. Similarly, instead of looking at *Emma* primarily as a novel, you'll be expected to consider how it relates to aspects of comedy. This is not to say that the fact that *Othello* is a play, 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' is a poem and *Emma* is a novel doesn't matter. You will also be expected to know about how prose fiction, drama and poetry differ from one another, and there are detailed sections on each of these genres in this book.

As we saw earlier, genre boundaries are frequently blurred. Some of the texts you study may be conventional – *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, for instance, is a classic of the detective novel genre. Many of the texts you study, however, are not. To stay with the example of crime writing, *Hamlet*, while it deals with issues of crime is not a traditional crime text. Nor is *The Great Gatsby* generally considered as an example of tragedy. That is why the units you study are called 'aspects of' tragedy and comedy and 'elements of' crime or political writing. The texts you study in these units are not necessarily 'pure' examples of the genres, but they do all relate to a central set of ideas relating to tragedy, comedy, crime writing or political writing. Your job is to explore how writers work with these ideas, even if they deliberately undermine them.

So, as you study each unit you need to think carefully about central features of tragedy or comedy and crime or political writing.

- What key social, cultural and philosophical concepts typically underpin these works?
- What issues do they typically deal with?

- Which aspects or elements of these forms do authors engage with and which do they leave out? How does this affect your responses as a reader?
- How do the writers seek to represent the world?
- How and to what extent do the texts vary according to genre and the time at which texts were produced?
- How do we approach and receive these texts in the 21st century?

ACTIVITY 4

Getting started

a Think about each of the units for study:
- Aspects of tragedy
- Aspects of comedy
- Elements of crime writing
- Elements of political writing.

What texts have you read, either in your previous studies or for pleasure, that fit into each of these categories? Don't be surprised if you find that some texts fit into two or even three of the broad categories.

b Taking each unit in turn, see what you already know in relation to each of these areas of literature.

Check your responses in the Ideas section on Cambridge Elevate

1.3.3 Literary non-fiction

Although you might not encounter much literary non-fiction in your course, it's worth thinking briefly about this genre, which is often included in the study of literature. In contrast to the other main genres, literary non-fiction includes a variety of other literary forms that are more specifically 'factual' in nature, for example:

- investigative journalism (for example, Bernstein and Woodward's *All the President's Men* or Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*)
- **reportage** (for example, Norman Mailer's *The Fight* which is based around Muhammad Ali's famous 'rumble in the jungle' boxing match; George Orwell's *Down and Out in Paris and London*)
- travel writing (for example, Jonathan Raban's *Old Glory* – an account of a trip down the length of the Mississippi River; the many popular works of Bill Bryson)
- biography (for example, Boswell's famous *The Life of Samuel Johnson* or Peter Ackroyd's sequence of biographies)
- essays (for example, Montaigne's Essays, but many literary writers have produced essays on a wide variety of subjects).

In addition, **literary criticism** and **literary theory** – writing about literature – are often regarded as types of literary non-fiction. You will encounter a range of literary criticism and theory during your course. They are important because they will:

- introduce you to a variety of ways of thinking about and reading literary texts
- provide you with excellent models for how to write about literature.

Narrative even has its own branch of literary criticism – narrative theory.

See 9.1 for more on literary theory

1.4 Narrative

Narrative is central to all the main genres. Prose fiction, narrative poetry, drama and many works of literary non-fiction are narratives, and even in poetry that does not actually tell a story, certain aspects of narrative such as **voice**, character and setting may be important.

Key terms

reportage: a factual, journalistic account presented in a book or other text

literary criticism: the art of making judgements about and commenting upon the qualities and character of literary works

literary theory: the study of the way in which we interpret literary texts

voice: the distinctive manner of expression of an author or narrator

See 9.4 for more on narrative theory

See 1.5.4 for more on voice

1.4.1 What is narrative?

At its simplest, narrative is the act of telling a story. The US media analyst Andrew Blau has commented that 'Human beings tell stories. It is how we learn and how we teach, how we preserve and transmit culture. It is how we understand ourselves and others. The instinct to tell stories and seek them out remains an essential part of being human' (2004: 1).

ACTIVITY 5

Narrative and you

a How do you respond to Blau's views about humans and narrative?
b How do you use story as a way of understanding yourself?
c How do you use story as a way of representing yourself to the world?
d How do those stories differ according to who you're telling them to and why you're telling them?

This simple view of narrative is, of course, only the starting point. Tzvetan Todorov (in David Lodge, *Nice Work,* 1988) says that thinking about narrative requires us to make a distinction between the content of a story (*fabula*) and the way it is ordered, organised and presented (*sjuzet*). It involves thinking about a variety of things.

- Who is telling the story?
- What kind of relationship is established between the narrator and the reader?
- How is the story told?
- What is explicitly told, what is implied and what is omitted?
- What values does the story convey?
- How does the teller feel about the story they are telling?

In other words, we need to ask why the story is being told in the way it is.

ACTIVITY 6

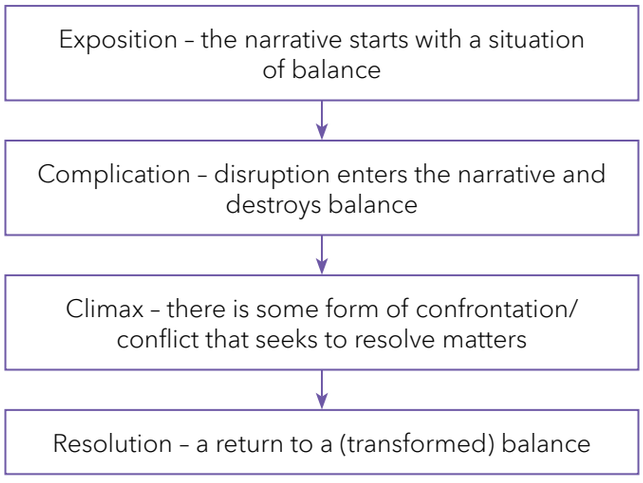
Fabula* and *sjuzet

a Think of a story that exists in several different versions – fairy tales are often very good for this.
b Are the details of the story (*fabula*) the same in each case?
c Now try to answer the questions in Activity 5 in relation to the way each version of the story is told (*sjuzet*).

1.4.2 How do narratives work?

Todorov goes on to set out a theory for narrative structure. He proposes a basic four-part model as shown in Figure 1D, which provides a very interesting way of thinking about stories in a variety of genres.

Figure 1D



'Human beings tell stories. It is how we learn and how we teach…'

Andrew Blau

ACTIVITY 7

Todorov in action

a Think about a variety of different narratives that you're very familiar with – these could be novels, plays, poems, films, television dramas and so on.
b How far does Todorov's model apply to each?
c In what ways do different narratives diverge from the model?
d How do narratives differ according to genre? What methods of telling stories are available on screen, for example, that aren't available to a novelist?

1.4.3 Components of narrative

Narratives are made up of a range of different components and you should think about what each of these contributes to the development and representation of the story:

Component	The ways in which authors…
Characterisation	… build characters
Voice	… use narrative voices – sometimes more than one in the same text – to tell stories in particular ways
Perspective	… use differing points of view from which stories are told and read
Setting	… set the narrative in specific places and at specific times
Destination	… bring the narrative to an end that may suggest particular meanings

ACTIVITY 8

Unpicking aspects of narrative

Choose a narrative that you know particularly well or one that you're currently reading or studying. It could be a novel, a play, a narrative poem or a work of narrative non-fiction. You could also use a screen drama you know well or a video game. Think in detail about aspects of its narrative, as given in the lists of questions about setting, characterisation, voice, structure and destination in the box.

In order to explore differences between texts, you might want to do this activity for more than one text.

Narrative setting: scenes/places/locations

- When is it set? Where is it set? How many settings does it have?
- Are the settings real or imagined?
- What do the settings represent, suggest or symbolise?
- Are journeys between places important?
- What **imagery** is used to describe places?

Narrative characterisation

- Identify the characters. Which are major, which are minor?
- Are they realistic? Or are they **stereotypes** or symbolic?
- Are their names significant?
- How are the characters developed (for example, through description, dialogue, voice, employment, action)?
- Does the author use imagery to build character?

Narrative voice and perspective

- Who is the narrator(s)? Is the narrator the same as the writer?
- What 'voice' does the narrator(s) have?
- What do we know about the narrator?
- Whose point of view does the narrator represent?
- Do you trust the narrator?
- Who does the narrator address?
- What kinds of language does the narrator use?

Narrative structure

- What is the time and sequence of the narrative? (for example, how much time elapses? Is the narrative chronological? What is the pace of the narrative?)
- Is the narrative divided? If so, how (for example, stanzas, chapters, scenes)? What effect does this have on how the story is told and how you read it (for example, is it easier to take a break in reading if a book has lots of shorter chapters or fewer longer chapters)?
- How is tension created?
- What links, patterns or echoes are there between parts?
- How are beginnings and endings significant?

Narrative destination

- What might the overall meanings and/or messages of the narrative be?
- Is the title significant?
- How much ambiguity and room for interpretation is there in the narrative?

- How far are meanings dependent on a specific historical, cultural or social context?

By exploring these questions, you will have seen the extent to which writers deliberately shape their narratives and how language, form and structure can have an impact on how readers 'receive' and interpret stories. These aspects of narrative and the ways in which they apply to each of the main genres are all further explored throughout this book.

Key terms

imagery: the use of words to visually or figuratively suggest meaning

stereotype: a character embodying a set of limited, well-recognised features (for example, a nagging mother-in-law or a lazy, good-for-nothing husband)

See 1.5.6 for more on imagery

See 1.5.4 for more on voice

1.5 Language

In your previous study of literature, you will have learned to explore and analyse the ways in which authors express meaning and achieve effects through their use of language. Some students find this aspect of literary study challenging. Sometimes students ask whether authors actually mean to use language in particular ways – as if the imagery, rhyming patterns or narrative voices they find in literary texts all arrived there by accident. Usually writers select elements like these very carefully in order to affect their readers.

If you look at draft versions of writers' work, you can see that a lot of thought really does go into very precise choices.

ACTIVITY 9

Exploring early drafts

The poet Wilfred Owen (1893–1918) will always be associated with World War I. One of his most famous poems, 'Anthem for Doomed Youth', is a **sonnet** about the men who went to fight in the war and never returned. However, it wasn't always called 'Anthem for Doomed Youth'. The earliest surviving draft of the poem is titled 'Anthem for Dead Youth'. Why do you think Owen may have changed 'Dead' to 'Doomed'?

The first line of the poem, in Owen's first draft, reads as follows: 'What passing-bells for you who die in herds?' In the final draft, the line has been changed to: 'What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?'

What effect is created by changing 'herds' to 'cattle'? What effect is created by changing 'you' to 'these'?

Exploring Wilfred Owen's poetry

Images of the draft versions of Owen's poems can be found on the First World War Poetry Digital Archive

Visit the First world war poetry digital archive on Cambridge Elevate

Key terms

sonnet: a 14-line poem that can use a variety of rhyme schemes to usually make up the 14 lines

Often, people think of the writing process as something mysterious and inspired – as if the words suddenly appear from nowhere. It might help to imagine it as more of a craft that needs to be practised. Just as visual artists learn that watercolour produces very different results to charcoal, and just as musicians learn the effects of tempo and dynamics, writers learn that their choices of language will shape the meanings they communicate to their readers.

1.5.1 Form and structure

Form is a complex term to define as it has a number of related meanings. On a simple level, it can mean whether a piece of writing is in prose or verse.

Prose is the ordinary form of written language, organised into sentences and paragraphs. The easiest way to identify prose is to look at whether the lines go all the way to the right-hand side of the page or column (as they do, for instance, in this paragraph).

Verse is a poetic form of written language, organised into lines and stanzas. Poetry is written in verse, but we also find verse in drama (Shakespeare's plays, for instance, use verse and prose for a variety of reasons). Traditionally, verse has an identifiable metre, such as **iambic pentameter**, but much modern verse does not use metre.

Key terms

prose: the mode of language, mainly associated in literature with fiction, in which text is organised into paragraphs, as distinct from verse

verse: the mode of language, mainly associated in literature with poetry, in which text is organised into separate lines, as distinct from prose

iambic pentameter: a rhythm (metre) consisting of five iambic feet

See 2.3.2 for more on metre

Form can also refer to whether a piece of writing is a novel, poem or play – or, indeed, a short story or essay. Yet poems themselves can have different forms – such as the sonnet, **sestina** or **villanelle**.

Form can also be used to refer to the way an author has used a particular set of conventions related to the shape and layout of a piece of writing. The concept of form therefore overlaps with **structure**, which refers to the way in which a piece of writing is organised. For example, the play *form* is usually *structured* by being divided into acts. When we analyse a play, we consider how these divisions are used in the narrative (for example, how a particularly shocking revelation might be placed at the end of an act to create dramatic impact).

Key terms

sestina: a poem with six stanzas and a final triplet. Each stanza comprises six lines and ends with the same six words repeated in six different sequences

villanelle: a lyric poem with 19 lines, with only two rhymes throughout, and some repeated lines

structure: the way a piece of writing is organised within its form

Structure involves thinking about these points:

- how texts begin, unfold and end
- the use of time (chronological or non-chronological)
- the use of dual or multiple narrators
- the division of a text into acts and scenes, parts and chapters, stanzas or verse-paragraphs
- techniques such as **foreshadowing** and **flashbacks**.

Key terms

foreshadowing: a technique in which narrative refers to something that has not yet happened but will happen later

flashback: a technique in which narrative moves back in time to refer to something that has already happened

Here are three examples of the way in which texts are structured, each a different literary form: a novel, a play and a poem.

1 Andrea Levy's novel *Small Island* begins with a Prologue and is then divided into sections, titled '1948' and 'Before', that alternate between events in 1948 and events that took place before the outbreak of World War II. Each section is divided further into chapters named after their respective

narrators – Gilbert, Hortense, Queenie and Bernard. The use of different narrators and a non-chronological timescale allows Levy to explore a range of perspectives on the events that unfold.

2 Arthur Miller's play *A View from the Bridge* is divided into two acts. Each act begins with a short soliloquy spoken by Alfieri, who speaks directly to the audience to set the events that follow in context. Act One ends on a note of extreme tension, as the Italian immigrant, Marco, challenges the play's protagonist, Eddie, by threatening his position in his own household. The beginning of Act Two marks the passage of time and allows Miller to break the tension created at the end of the previous act.

3 U.A. Fanthorpe's poem 'Not My Best Side', which was inspired by Paolo Uccello's painting 'St George and the Dragon', is made up of three dramatic monologues – one spoken by the dragon in Uccello's painting, one by the princess who is being rescued, and one by St George himself. Each contains 19 lines and consists of the narrator's thoughts on the situation depicted in the painting.

1.5.2 Style

Style can be described as the overall manner in which a text is expressed. It could be simple and sparse or complex and dense; colloquial and accessible or sophisticated and difficult.

The examples in Texts 1B–1E are taken from a range of novels.

Text 1B

Can anything, my good Sir, be more painful to a friendly mind, than a necessity of communicating disagreeable intelligence? Indeed it is sometimes difficult to determine, whether the relator or the receiver of evil tidings is most to be pitied.

Frances Burney, *Evelina* (1778)

Text 1C

A Saturday afternoon in November was approaching the time of twilight, and the vast tract of unenclosed wild known as Egdon Heath embrowned itself moment by moment. Overhead the hollow stretch of whitish cloud shutting out the sky was as a tent which had the whole heath for its floor.

Thomas Hardy, *The Return of the Native* (1878)

Text 1D

You don't know about me without you have read a book by the name of The Adventures of Tom Sawyer; but that ain't no matter. That book was made by Mr. Mark Twain, and he told the truth, mainly. There was things which he stretched, but mainly he told the truth.

Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884)

Text 1E

The sky rained dismal. It rained humdrum. It rained the kind of rain that is so much wetter than normal rain, the kind of rain that comes down in big drops and splats, the kind of rain that is merely an upright sea with slots in it.

Terry Pratchett, *Truckers* (1989)

ACTIVITY 10

Thinking about style

How would you describe the different styles that these extracts represent? Write a brief paragraph about the style of each extract. Think, for example, about:

- the vocabulary
- the register of language
- how speech is represented
- how sentence structure is used to convey meaning.

1.5.3 Tone

Tone is best described as the attitude conveyed by a literary text, whether this is solemn or playful, serious or light-hearted, formal or informal, emotional or matter-of-fact, sincere or ironic. It is linked to the stance adopted by an author (or narrator) towards a particular topic, and, by extension, the stance that he or she wants the reader to adopt.

Key terms

tone: the attitude conveyed by a literary text