Every reader can talk about plot and characters, but there are many other things to be aware of in reading literature. Some readers pay attention to biographical facts: how does the story relate to the writer's life? Others look at literature in relation to history: what does the story say about real events? Other readers are interested in books for their philosophy: what do they show about what the writer believed and thought about the world? Still others look at books in psychological terms: what are the characters like and why do they act as they do?

All of these people look at books in terms of other kinds of information and knowledge: for example, to react to a book historically, the reader has to know something about history from other sources than the book alone. But there is another way of studying books which does not depend on knowing anything from outside the books. This is called structural analysis, and it is the primary way in which we will look at literature in this course.

The purpose of structural analysis is to understand the work as a whole and the writer's purposes and message in it. Analysis is never useful for its own sake—only as a tool to help the reader understand how the writer went about doing what he wanted to do. The main job of the student is to see what the author wanted to do and to understand how each of his "tricks" in writing lets him do it better.

The Elements of Structural Analysis

1. Structure: the form of the work. Ask yourself what are the parts of the work? How do they fit together? What makes the work seem complete and unified? Where do the high points (climax) come? What is the time order of the story? Does the writer use flashbacks (moving back to earlier times)? Why do you think the author has used this form? How does it help him to say what he wants to say, to put his point across or have the effect on the reader that he wishes to have?

2. Point of View: This is not the same thing as the writer's opinion or belief. It is the character who tells the story (the Narrator), the one or ones whose thoughts the reader knows. Ask whether the story is told in the first person ("I") or third person ("he"); whether the teller is a character (participant) in the story or an outsider looking on; whether the writer himself is the narrator; whether the narrator knows more than any one character could know (omniscient narrator) or only what one character would know (limited); whether the point of view changes from one character to another in different parts of the work (shifting narration); whether the reader knows only what characters say (in dialogue)--as he would at a play (dramatic or objective narration)--without knowing what any of them think; whether the author steps in to speak directly to the reader (authorial intrusions) at some points; whether the point of view is always the same or the writer "cheats" by being inconsistent in his point of view. Then ask the main question: WHY did the writer choose to tell the story in this way?

3. Active Details: things which are repeated in the story (motifs) and/or seem to mean a lot to the writer, to stand for something more (symbols). Some symbols are known to everyone (black = death, sadness); others are “private symbols,” made up by the writer (the man who spits on cats in The Plague, for example). Try to understand what these active details mean, why the writer has used them and how they help him to do what he wants to do.

4. Insights/Theme: ideas expressed by characters or the author, or new things seen or understood by the reader as he thinks about the story. Ask yourself what new things you have
understood as you read. Ask what ideas the characters express as truths. Insights are important because they may let the writer express his own ideas--his message in the story.

5. Style: how the author uses language. Ask why the author chooses one word instead of another (word choice is called *diction*), why he writes long or short sentences, simple or complex ones (*syntax*). Ask whether he seems to be using the sounds and rhythms of words for an effect. Ask what feelings the words give you (their *connotations*) as well as what they "mean"--what information they give (their *denotations*). Ask what the author seems to feel about his characters and their situation (his *tone*) and what he makes the reader feel about them and their setting (*mood* or *atmosphere*). Look for *allusions*--mentions of other writers, events in history, etc., which the writer may use to point out extra levels of meaning for his story. Finally, ask why the author uses language in this way, with what effect.

6. Characters: are the characters static or dynamic? Do they learn from their mistakes? Are they rounded (showing both positive and negative aspects) or are they flat (only good or bad)? Are they stereotypical, or stock, characters? How is the characterization given to us? Is it direct characterization (i.e., we are told what they or like), or is it indirect (i.e., we are left to interpret from their words and actions what they are like)? Keep a list of all of the major characters and detailed notes regarding how we determine who they and what they are like.

Always remember that the good writer is a accomplished craftsman, using literary techniques with skill and care to make the reader react in a certain way. Use your analysis of the techniques as clues to help you understand what was the writer's controlling purpose.

On your first reading, you should look for all the clues to what the writer was trying to do. Try to state the "meaning" of the work, and then start to analyze the writing under the six headings given above, always trying to see how the techniques relate to the purpose, how they help the writer to do what he is trying to do, say what he wants to say.

**Further Reading:**
All of the elements in the above introduction are developed in more detail with specific examples in the chapter introductions in your literature anthology by Arp & Perrine (HBJ). For further definitions, you may want to consult the following websites, which have on-line dictionaries of literary terms. All of these pages have also been saved on the Server disk under:

`\English\IB English A\LiteraryTerms`

**Dictionaries and Reference Texts**
http://www.bartleby.com

**Lynch, Glossary of Literary and Rhetorical Terms**
http://newark.rutgers.edu/~jlynch/Terms/

**A Glossary of Literary Terms**
http://www.virtualsalt.com/litterms.htm

**Literary Terms**

**The UVic Writer's Guide - Alphabetical List**
http://web.uvic.ca/wguide/Pages/LiteraryTermsIndex.html