

Reading Non-fiction

The genre spectrum of non-fiction ranges from the more formal, objective type (i.e., scholarly articles, medical research reports, historical analyses, etc.) to an emerging type often labeled *literary non-fiction*, which is fact-based but highly subjective, and with a greater emphasis on language that is more sophisticated, evocative, and artful than that found in a simple news article. The non-fiction book we're studying falls into the middle range of the spectrum, with a mixture of subjective analysis and informal argument. Nevertheless, we can analyze any sort of non-fiction using the following three categories to broaden our appreciation of the work and deepen our understanding of the author's ideas:

MEANING

A determination of meaning involves coming to an understanding of what the author says *literally* and "on the surface" but also what the author *implies* "beneath the surface" and, more generally, what the author's aims are. It's helpful to try and sum up the author's **thesis** (the main or controlling idea) and **purpose** (the intellectual, emotional, and ethical effect the author communicates). What main idea does the author want the reader to comprehend? Does the author intend to entertain, explain, persuade—or some combination thereof?

STRATEGY

Determining the writer's strategy is a matter of asking *how* they achieve their desired effects. Helpful questions of strategic analysis might include, Who is the intended **audience** for this piece? What sort of assumptions does the author make about the reader? Also, how does the author use **evidence** (facts, examples, reasons, opinions, etc.) to develop their claims? Which *methods* (or modes) of development are employed—narration, description, cause and effect, etc.? Examine the author's sense of **structure**: How do they achieve unity and coherence? In what ways does the organization serve the author's purposes?

LANGUAGE

Determining **tone** of voice (the author's attitude towards subject, self, and audience) is essential to meaning. Is the tone angry or sarcastic, joking or serious—or some combination? If the tone shifts, to what effect and for what purpose? The author's **style** can be determined by analyzing *figures of speech* (metaphor, simile, personification, etc.), patterns of *diction*, *sentence structure*, and any creative departures from the norms of standard American English, such as rhetorical fragments or flourishes of lyricism. Nothing characterizes a good writer more clearly than a fondness and respect for words and a yen to experiment with them.