

read for the craft, not just the story



What a prose question actually asks

- a summary or retell question rarely appears alone, the marks sit in explaining craft, not restating events
- character sketch: build the person from two or three concrete details the writer gives, not a list of adjectives
- theme or message: name the writer's central idea and trace where the text signals it
- reference to context: a short quoted line, then who says it, to whom, and why it matters here

Reading a prose piece for the answer, not the story

- first read for the arc, what changes between the opening and the close
- mark two or three moments where the writer slows down, that is usually where the meaning sits
- watch for a shift in tone, from playful to serious or from certain to doubtful, it often signals the theme
- a detail repeated more than once in a piece is rarely accidental, note it

Chapter	Writer	Built to teach
The Portrait of a Lady	Khushwant Singh	a character built from small, concrete detail
We're Not Afraid to Die	Cook and East	how ordeal and teamwork carry a real narrative
Discovering Tut	A. R. Williams	how a report-style piece still argues a claim
The Adventure	Jayant Narlikar	a story built inside a science idea, cause and consequence
Silk Road	Nick Middleton	travel writing that mixes fact with a personal voice

Character question vs theme question

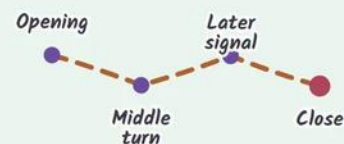
Character sketch



a root box labelled Character branching down to four labelled children: Detail, Word choice, Inner quality, Reader's sense

- build the person from two or three concrete details
- join a physical detail to an inner quality, don't just list traits
- end by naming what the detail reveals about them

Theme or message



four stops in order along a dashed path: Opening, Middle turn, Later signal, Close, tracing where a theme surfaces across a piece

- name the idea in one line before writing anything else
- trace two or three moments across the piece that build toward it
- close by tying the idea back to the writer's own words

spot which one the question wants before you start listing points