Your knowledge about how to approach literary texts should include not only the more traditional areas of literary study (such as rhetorical tropes, use of thematic devices, rhyme, metre and so on), but also some understanding of critical theory. Your knowledge here should, in simple terms, include the following:

- **Literature**: a textual form
- **Language**: the medium of texts
- **Linguistics**: a meta-language; language about language

The relationship among these elements is important:

![Diagram showing the relationship between literature, language, and linguistics]

The novelist’s medium is language; whatever he does, as novelist, is done in and through language. -- (Lodge, 1966)

It might be argued then, that any literary text is by definition made of and by language.

Language is that which enables an idea to be partly realized; there are elements which come before language, and elements which come after it.

Language may be seen as being produced along two axes:

- **Syntagmatic**, or horizontal; and **paradigmatic**, or vertical

  Syntagmatic represents combination / sequence
  Paradigmatic represents selection / choice
Consider the following:

*det.*  *n.*  *vb.*  *adj.*

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Any possible combinations, choices??

Why is this important?

Syntagmatic and paradigmatic elements are intimately related, and can be seen at every level of *discourse*. For instance, at one level, letters or sounds are combined in sequence to form words; at a higher level, sentences combine to form texts. At each point within each level, a number of possible elements can be realized.

The discerning reader infers something from the author’s combination / sequence, and selection / choice. This ability is the basis for critical theory put into practice.

Some further definitions:

**TEXT**: comes from the Latin *textere*, which means to weave. This suggests a coherent, integrated collection of sentences, but this is not really the case. A text is a *stretch* (use) of the language, complete or partial. It may be *War and Peace*, or it may be a sign saying *STOP*. Text can also be a jumble of seemingly unrelated words and/or sentences:

*Gladstone today for the coffee while Ms. Dedijer keeps goats.*

**DISCOURSE**: *striving to understand text(s)*. When a text is realized in an understandable context, when it is coherent for the reader, it is a discourse. A text is transformed into discourse when it forms a coherent whole (even if it is a fragment).
NARRATOLOGY

the study of how stories work and how readers understand stories

ELEMENTS OF A NARRATIVE

• no single right way of analysing a narrative; analysis needs to justify itself by producing interesting insights in texts

• four possible kinds of analysis, which focus on different elements in the text:

  i. The Act of Narration

  ii. Fabula vs discourse (how discourse mediates events)

  iii. Speed of Action

  iv. Plot Structure Patterns and Actants

The Act of Narration

• someone is telling the story, and someone is listening to it or reading it

• teller and listener are often present in the story

• author has in mind a reader whom he / she wants to take care of in some way

• person or audience in the text is called the narrate and is often different from the actual reader

• some texts say a lot about the narrator and narratee; others say little

• point of view important (omniscient: narrator not specified but has access to minds of all characters)

• status of the narrator and narrate may be important elements in the story, and greatly influence our response to a text
**Fabula vs Discourse**

the events-as-they-happened vs
the story that presents them

- **fabula**: a complete account of the events as they happened
- **novel** most often cannot give a complete account
- **discourse**: simply means *something put into language*
- involves certain choices about how the events will be put into language
- **narratology** helps describe these structures
- **flashback** (technical term *analepsis*)
- **jumpforward** (*prolepsis*)
- *in medias res*
- **focalization**: narration passes through the mind of a particular person
Speed of Action & Catalytic Material

• when approached in another way, material in a text can be divided into two categories: **hinge events** and **catalytic events**

• hinge events are those in which there is a turn in the story; they mark a significant new stage in the narrative; each of them is necessary

• catalytic events do not change the plot of the story; they are non-essential actions, descriptions, information, reflection

• the distinction between hinge and catalytic accounts for the difference in feel between stories and how we respond

• what is most significant in this distinction is the relative presence of each in a particular text

• a text in which hinge events predominate often has a **syntagmatic feel** (to put together in the right order); such a text is tied to the concrete word; we ask what is going to happen? How is this going to end?

• A text which contains more catalytic material often has a **paradigmatic feel** (a model or pattern); tied to the parallels that exist between different parts of experience; we ask what does all this mean?

• We sort out the hinge events on a first reading and grasp for meaning paying attention to the catalytic material on further readings
Actants and Plot Grammars

- A fourth way to approach narrative structures is to focus on general patterns in the structure of plots
- Narratives may contain six roles that form three pairs: these roles are called actants
  - The subject (the protagonist) who searches for the object (which may be a person or a state being)
  - The sender (the person of institution that gives the subject a sense of values and sends the subject in search of the object), and the receiver (who receives the object looked for by the subject)
  - The helper (who aids the subject in the quest), and the opponent (who tries to hinder the subject)

All of us are continually making movies about our lives in our heads, thinking about the past and the future. When we create those narratives, to what extent are we constrained by the formal features and rules of narrative? To understand our own lives, do we need to know who the sender is and who the opponent? To tell our stories, do we need to discover the hinge events in our lives? When we speak and wish to be understood, we usually follow the rules of grammar – but this only guarantees the coherence of our sentences. Narratology can help us understand the larger stories we construct in our lives, both those that explain the past and those that reach into the future.

(for further reading: Stephen Bonnycastle, In Search of Authority)