

## ONE SENTENCE SUMMARY

One of many useful techniques in the reading and understanding of literature is the one-sentence summary. This technique essentially involves engaging in the activities of a good, thorough journalist: asking the right questions. These questions include:

**Who?**

**Does/did what?**

**To/for/with whom?**

**When?**

**Where?**

**Wow?**

**Why?**

As you look at this list of questions, notice that they're written in a particular order: they get more difficult (or complex or sophisticated) as you move down the list, ultimately ending with the toughest question of all: WHY?

When we read literature (or anything worth thinking about, for that matter) we owe it to ourselves to attempt a thorough understanding of what we've just experienced. Engaging in the one-sentence summary is one way to begin gaining that understanding.

In theory, the one-sentence summary is fairly simple: after reading a piece of literature, simply ask and answer the list of questions, and then try to compose a single, sophisticated sentence out of your responses.

In practice, it's just a bit tougher than in theory (ain't that just always the case, though?) because those pesky writers always provide us with multiple layers of meaning, multiple possibilities for interpretation. In interpreting literature, there are no "wrong" answers. There are only more successful and less successful interpretations, based on the validity of the supporting evidence.

Here is a sample, based on "Snake" by D. H. Lawrence. Recognize that what follows is not the definitive summary of this particular poem; it is merely one fairly reasonable interpretation.

Who: A man, the speaker of the poem (Lawrence?)

Does what: comes to his water trough and contemplates violence

To/for/with whom: against a snake who arrived earlier than he

When: early in the morning

Where: an old stone well, in Sicily (does this matter?)

How: fearfully, aggressively, in conflict

Why: because his education tells him to kill beasts

because he wants to be "manly"

because the snake is superior?

Now that we've gone through the process of brainstorming some possible "answers" to my "reporter's questions," we can formulate one reasonable sentence of interpretation:

In "Snake," D. H. Lawrence presents a man who, arriving at his well early one morning in Sicily and finding a snake already in residence, wages an inner battle over whether to abuse or revere this representative of the mystical animal kingdom.