



Plot and structure

- What happens in each chapter?
- How is the timing of events in the novel worked out?
- What is the overall 'shape' of the novel?
- How does Harper Lee organise her material to keep the reader interested?

Plot

Part One

Chapter 1

- Members of the Finch family and their background.
- Charlie Baker Harris (Dill) staying next door with Miss Rachel Haverford for the summer.
- First mention of Boo Radley.

Atticus Finch is a widowed lawyer bringing up two children, Jean Louise ('Scout') aged six — who is telling the story — and Jeremy ('Jem') aged 12 in Maycomb. He is helped by Calpurnia, a respected black cook, house-keeper and substitute mother. The children make friends with Charles Baker ('Dill') Harris from Mississippi who is spending the summer with his aunt. All three children are fascinated by the unseen Arthur ('Boo') Radley, a neighbour.

Chapter 2

- Dill leaves Maycomb.
- Scout's first morning at school.
- Miss Caroline Fisher's disappointing teaching.
- Walter Cunningham's poverty.

Scout misses Dill and finds school disappointing because her young teacher, who is new to the school, disapproves of her ability to read. Then a misunderstanding arises when Scout tries to explain to Miss Caroline that Walter Cunningham has brought neither packed lunch nor money to school because he is poor. Scout knows the family because, in the previous year, Atticus had done legal work for Walter's father for which

Mr Cunningham could pay Atticus only 'in kind' by bringing, for example, logs and hickory nuts for the Finch family.

Text focus

Look carefully at Chapter 2 from 'My special knowledge of the Cunningham tribe' to 'Jem's definitions are very nearly accurate sometimes'. Read it several times.

- Note that Jem tells Scout that an entailment is 'a condition of having your tail in a crack'. This is an example of one of Harper Lee's many wry jokes, this time at Jem's expense. It is an instance of **irony**. Jem has invented the definition. An entailment is actually a legal term meaning that there is a limitation on what an owner may do with his property. However, can you see what Atticus means when he says 'Jem's definitions are very nearly accurate sometimes'? Mr Cunningham cannot do what he wants to because of the entailment — like an animal whose tail is trapped. That is what makes Jem's definition ironic.
- There is evidence in this passage of the poverty that the working people in Maycomb experience and the reaction of professional people such as lawyers and doctors to it. They will accept goods such as logs, nuts, holly or potatoes as payment for services instead of money. Such bartering of goods and services helps everyone in difficult times because poverty caused by an economic depression affects all classes. Atticus tells Scout, 'We are indeed' when she asks him whether their own family is poor.
- Harper Lee often uses short sentences with one subject and one verb, such as 'We watched', 'Jem's nose wrinkled' and 'Entailment was only part of Mr Cunningham's vexations'. The technical name for this is a **simple sentence** (as opposed to a **compound** or **complex sentence**). The frequency of simple sentences makes the writing direct and incisive. It is an appropriate style for a story about children growing up. Find other examples of simple sentences in this passage and think about their effect.
- Look carefully at the way Harper Lee sets out the dialogue in this passage. She makes it move quickly by omitting 'he said', 'she said' or their equivalents. It is a technique borrowed from drama and perhaps it is not surprising that the novel has been made into a successful film and a play for live performance. Lee's style of writing conversations already reads rather like a play script.
- Earlier in this chapter, Scout says, 'He hasn't taught me anything, Miss Caroline. Atticus ain't got time to teach me anything.' What evidence can you find here that shows this is untrue?
- What is the evidence that the Cunninghams are a 'set breed of men'?

Chapter 3

- Walter Cunningham has lunch with the Finches.
- Calpurnia rebukes Scout for bad manners.
- First mention of Ewell family through Burris — who is both dirty and rude at school.
- Scout and Atticus discuss school.

Jem invites Walter Cunningham home for lunch but Scout angers Calpurnia by commenting tactlessly on Walter's eating habits. In the afternoon, Miss



Key quotation

'You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view...until you climb into his skin and walk around in it.'

(Atticus, Chapter 3)

Caroline is upset by lice-infested Burris Ewell, who storms abusively out of school. Later Scout tells Atticus that she does not want to go to school. Atticus explains sympathetically that she must but he promises to go on reading with her despite the teacher's instructions.

Chapter 4

- Gifts found in a tree on Radley property.
- Dill returns for summer 1934.
- Atticus questions the children about their make-believe games.
- Radleys heard laughing.

Scout finds some wrapped chewing gum left for her in an oak tree near the Radley house. Later, she and Jem find old coins there. With Dill, they begin to develop a make-believe game based on local rumours and legends about Boo Radley. Atticus catches them and suspects they are planning to torment Boo. Scout thinks she hears laughter in the Radley house when she unintentionally gets close to it by rolling inside a tyre.

Chapter 5

- Miss Maudie explains Boo Radley's background.
- Children try to force Boo Radley outside.
- Atticus forbids them to play 'One Man's Family'.

Miss Maudie Atkinson is a sensible, humane neighbour who dislikes gossip. She tells Scout that Boo is a shy, damaged man bullied by his late father, who just wants to stay indoors. The next day the three children try to entice Boo Radley out of his house. Atticus discovers them and stops the game, forbidding them to play the Boo Radley-based make-believe game in future.

Chapter 6

- The children approach the Radley house in the dark.
- Nathan Radley shoots but misses them.
- Jem's trousers are left behind.

The children dare each other to sneak onto the Radley veranda in the dark. Boo's elder brother, Nathan, mistakes them for a black burglar and shoots. In the panic as they run away, Jem catches his trousers on a wire fence and leaves them. Neighbours hear the noise and come to investigate. Later that night when the commotion has died down Jem retrieves the trousers.



Pause for thought

How is Harper Lee gradually building up the character of Atticus? Why do you think she gave him the same name as a Roman nobleman and diplomat, Titus Pomponius Atticus (109–32 BC), who was known for his impartial wisdom and interest in books?

Chapter 7

- Jem's trousers mysteriously already mended when he takes them back.
- More gifts in the tree.
- Nathan Radley blocks hole in the tree where gifts were left.

Jem tells Scout that when he went back to the Radley house, his trousers had been mended and deliberately left on the top of the fence for him to collect. In the hole in the oak tree the children find various gifts over several weeks. Soon they discover the hole has been filled with cement by Nathan Radley who says it is because the tree is dying. Actually, it is to stop his brother leaving things for the children.

Chapter 8

- Mrs Radley dies.
- Snowfall in Maycomb — very unusual.
- The children build a snowman.
- Miss Maudie's house burns.

Nathan and Boo's rarely seen mother dies during the winter 'of natural causes' but nobody takes much notice. Scout is disconcerted by her first sight of snow. Then the children build a snow model of their fat neighbour, Mr Avery. During the night, Miss Maudie's house accidentally catches fire and is destroyed, but she shows great courage in accepting the loss. Someone — she does not realise who — quietly puts a blanket around Scout's shoulders while she is watching the fire.

Chapter 9

- Atticus to defend a black man accused of rape.
- Scout already taunted at school about her father's tolerance of black people.
- Christmas at Aunt Alexandra's home.
- Scout fights her second cousin Francis.
- Uncle Jack disciplines Scout.
- Conversation between Atticus and Uncle Jack.

Cecil Jacobs taunts Scout whose 'daddy defended niggers'. Atticus later explains that he intends to defend Tom Robinson, a black man accused of rape. Meanwhile, the children and Atticus spend Christmas with Aunt Alexandra, sister to Atticus and Jack. Her grandson Francis, Scout's second cousin, goads Scout about her 'nigger-lover' father so they fight. Uncle



Jack, a doctor, punishes her for fighting and for her abusive language but apologises when he learns what the fight was about. Scout later overhears — as she is meant to — Atticus telling Jack that he hopes his children will talk to their father about the trial rather than listening to gossip.

Chapter 10

- Atticus gives the children airguns.
- Rabid dog approaches.
- Atticus called home from work.
- A skilled marksman, Atticus kills the dog with a single shot.

The children regard Atticus as ‘feeble’ because he is 50 years old and never takes part in sports, such as shooting, as other, younger fathers do. By giving them airguns he allows them to shoot at birds, but insists the children ‘remember it’s a sin to kill a mockingbird’, because mockingbirds do no harm — they simply sing. One Saturday the children spot a dog with rabies in the street. Calpurnia phones Atticus, who comes home immediately with Heck Tate, the sheriff, who asks Atticus to kill the dog because of Atticus’s superior skill with a gun. Atticus reluctantly, but with great expertise, kills the dog instantly. Later his astonished children learn that their father gave up shooting long ago on moral grounds.

Key quotation

‘it’s a sin to kill a mockingbird’

(Atticus, Chapter 10)

Chapter 11

- Mrs Dubose taunts the children.
- Jem vandalises her garden.
- Atticus makes Jem visit Mrs Dubose daily as a punishment.
- Death of Mrs Dubose, a former morphine addict.

Jem and Scout regularly pass the property of Mrs Henry Lafayette Dubose, whose ‘vicious’ habit is to sit on her porch and make aggressive remarks. ‘Your father’s no better than the niggers and trash he works for!’ she says and Jem’s control snaps. He bursts into Mrs Dubose’s front yard and breaks all the old lady’s camellia bushes. Atticus makes Jem apologise to Mrs Dubose and clear up the mess as well as calling each day to read to her. Mrs Dubose, now bedridden, usually falls asleep soon after the children arrive. Later that spring, she dies. Atticus explains that, very courageously, Mrs Dubose had overcome her addiction to a pain-killing drug at the end of her life.

Key quotation

‘before I can live with other folks I’ve got to live with myself. The one thing that doesn’t abide by majority rule is a person’s conscience’

(Atticus, Chapter 11)

Grade *focus*



In the A*–C grade range the examiners will expect to see not only that you know what happens in *To Kill a Mockingbird* but also that you recognise that it has a very distinct structure and shape. Use the following table to give yourself a clearer idea of what makes the difference between types of response in the higher and foundation tiers.

Grades A*–C	Grades D–G
<p>Harper Lee uses a first-person child narrator whose story of two and a half years in Maycomb unfolds with wry comment from the 'hidden' adult Scout</p> <p>Devices Lee uses to help the reader to see 'past' Scout include having her overhear conversations, and what others tell her — being told by other characters such as Jem, Miss Maudie and Dill about events at which she has not been present and discussions with Atticus and her own adult hindsight</p> <p>Part One leads to the trial, sets the scene and shows the children learning. Part Two is devoted to the trial and its aftermath with the incident with Bob Ewell and the final meeting with Boo Radley emerging from the central event of Part Two like a coda (or tailpiece) in music. Effectively the novel has two climaxes, the second of which leads to a very quiet conclusion as Scout falls asleep</p>	<p>Scout tells the story of two and half years of her childhood in Maycomb</p> <p>Scout describes what happened to her</p> <p>The novel is in two halves</p>

Pause for thought

A subheading for Part One of *To Kill a Mockingbird* could be 'Lessons the children learn'. Think carefully and list everything you can think of that Scout, Jem and Dill learn during the first 11 chapters, ranging from small, apparently trivial things to major lessons in life. It may be a good idea to organise your ideas in a table with three columns, one for each child.



Part Two

Chapter 12

- Jem is growing up and becoming distant.
- Children go to Calpurnia's 'black' church.
- Collection for Tom Robinson's family.
- Aunt Alexandra unexpectedly moves in.

Now 12, Jem is moody and less inclined to spend time with Scout. Calpurnia tries to comfort her but tells her this is inevitable. When, in Atticus's absence, Calpurnia is in charge of the children, she takes them to her church. There Lula tells Calpurnia she should not bring white children,



but everyone else makes Scout and Jem welcome. Few blacks can read hymn books. Reverend Sykes coaxes a generous sum for Helen Robinson out of the poor congregation. Back home Aunt Alexandra is waiting for the Finch children.

Chapter 13

- Aunt Alexandra entertains Maycomb's ladies.
- Aunt Alexandra's belief in family 'streaks'.
- Finch family history and Maycomb's social class or 'caste system'.
- Atticus's attitude to unquestioning family pride.

Aunt Alexandra, who has strong beliefs and prejudices, thinks the children are not being brought up properly. She believes that each Maycomb family has its own definite inherited tendencies. Atticus has agreed that she should stay but his views differ from his sister's. When she wants him to educate his children in family history and the 'gentle breeding' that makes the Finches 'fine folks', Atticus makes fun of it. Mildly resentful, the children accept Aunt Alexandra's arrival as an adult decision.

Chapter 14

- Gossip about the Finch family in town.
- Disagreements about Calpurnia.
- Runaway Dill found under Scout's bed.

The children are aware of growing hostility towards Atticus. In town Scout hears the word 'rape,' which she does not understand. A horrified Aunt Alexandra discovers that the children have been to Calpurnia's church and tells Atticus to get rid of her. Scout then overhears Atticus tell Aunt Alexandra that 'Calpurnia's not leaving this house until she wants to'. At bedtime Scout mistakes something beneath her bed for a snake but it turns out to be Dill in hiding. Atticus supplies food and contacts Dill's family.

Key quotation

'...I couldn't have gotten along without her [Calpurnia] all these years. She's a faithful member of this family.'

(Atticus, Chapter 14)

Chapter 15

- Dill to stay in Maycomb for a week.
- Tom Robinson's sympathisers warn Atticus.
- Jem, Scout and Dill creep to Maycomb jail after dark.
- Atticus 'guards' Tom Robinson.
- Lynch party from Old Sarum wants Tom.
- The situation is defused when Scout innocently speaks to Mr Cunningham.

Tactful intervention by Atticus gets Dill a week in Maycomb. The trial is imminent. Tom Robinson is now in Maycomb jail and trouble is likely so Atticus calmly goes to the jail to keep watch. Without permission, the three children follow him after dark. Men arrive from Old Sarum to take and lynch Tom. The situation is dangerous, especially for the children, whom Atticus tries to send home. Eventually, Scout speaks politely, naturally and normally to Mr Cunningham, one of the lynching party, the innocence of which seems to remind Mr Cunningham of ordinary human behaviour. The men disperse.

Chapter 16

- Breakfast discussion of incidents at the jail.
- Trial attracts big numbers.
- Dolphus Raymond's 'mixed' family outside courthouse.
- Children sit with Reverend Sykes in black people's gallery in full courtroom.

Atticus talks about mobs, individuals and Mr Underwood's concern for black justice. Aunt Alexandra reprimands him for speaking in front of Calpurnia — a black servant to her but part of the family for Atticus (and Scout and Jem). People flock to the trial opening in holiday mood. Outside the courthouse the children see Mr Dolphus Raymond, who has a reputation as a heavy drinker. Married to a black woman, he has a family of 'mixed' children. The children get into the full courtroom only because Reverend Sykes invites them to sit in the 'coloured balcony'.

Key quotation

'around here once you have a drop of Negro blood, that makes you all black'

(Jem, Chapter 16)

Chapter 17

- The first part of the trial.
- Heck Tate testifies to finding Mayella Ewell beaten up.
- Atticus establishes that no doctor was called to Mayella Ewell, that her right eye was injured and that Bob Ewell is left-handed.

Heck Tate explains that Bob Ewell sent for him. Mayella was lying hurt on the floor. She told the sheriff that Tom Robinson had injured and raped her, although there is no medical evidence. Atticus makes it clear that Mayella's right eye was hurt, not the left. This matters because a blow from a right-handed man, aimed straight, would normally land on the left of his victim's body. By asking Ewell to sign his name in court, Atticus demonstrates Ewell's left-handedness. It is therefore more likely that Ewell injured his daughter himself than that she was attacked by a right-handed person.