The first challenge of reading *Clarissa* is its length. This guide is intended to help first-time readers keep track of important details by suggesting themes, ideas, and terms to watch for, questions to ask, as well as structural elements that give shape to this long work (e.g., plot, character, setting, events).

Create an index of these items (and others that interest you) inside the covers of your copy. Annotating the Table of Letters (Penguin edition pp. 1500-11) will also help you keep track of important moments and plot developments.

Placed on reserve at the library are essay collections and an Index which you may find useful for identifying the key issues in this novel, and locating important passages.

**Issues for the entire work:**
What did Samuel Johnson, a famous 18th-century critic and friend of Richardson, mean by “read[ing] for the sentiment”?

**Plot:** In a story with only a few, but momentous, events, how does Richardson keep the reader’s interest? Are there identifiable places where you can pinpoint significant actions whose consequences are inevitable? (Where are the points after which it is too late to change the course of the story?)

**Characterization:** How are characters revealed? How do they change over the course of the novel, how do they remain constant? (For example, Johnson said, “You may observe there is always something which she [Clarissa] prefers to truth”--is this an accurate statement for the entire novel? Is it more or less accurate at different moments?)

**Style of narration:** What is the effect of the epistolary mode on characterization and plot? (Consider different accounts of the same event.) How does Richardson as author communicate with his readers? How does the narrative mode (letter writing) become a subject of the narrative itself?

**Key terms:** Consider the variety of meanings for words such as: WILL, TRIAL/TEST, DUTY, HONOUR, VIRTUE, INNOCENCE, INTEGRITY, HEART
First installment, Letters 1-93 (published 1 December 1747)

Dominant voices: Clarissa and Anna

Theme: Family

House: Harlowe Place

Consider the first two letters: how do they characterize Clarissa, her relationship with Anna, and the Harlowe family? What role does Anna continue to play as the situation develops?

The Harlowe family dynamic is brought into focus with the introduction of Solmes as Clarissa’s suitor: What are the family’s motives? Consider the scenes of confrontation (e.g., Letters 16, 42, 53, 78).

“A conditional kind of liking”: How do Clarissa’s statements about Lovelace reveal her feelings: is she wholly honest with herself and others (see Letters 19, 28, 29, 82, and Anna’s responses, e.g., L10)?

How does Lovelace’s first letter to Belford (L31) affect our understanding of the events of the novel, and his character (compare the “character sketch” given in L4 and 12, and Clarissa’s previous statements).

Consider the garden scenes: their significance and resonance (Letters 36, 53, 80--don’t forget about the retrospective accounts of the escape in Letters 94-99)

Note how the letters themselves become key elements in the action.

Key words: PREPOSESSION, WILL, HEART, TRIAL, RELATIONSHIP, PENETRATION, INDEPENDENCE, GENEROSITY, NOBLE, FATE, SECURITY

Second installment, Letters 94-231 (published 28 April 1748)

Dominant voices: Lovelace (ascend-ant) and Clarissa (descend-ant)

Themes: Romantic Love, Plotting

House: Sinclair’s

Compare the two accounts of the abduction (Letters 94-99)

Throughout this installment: How does Clarissa account for her behaviour? Now that she is alone, how do her assessments of her situation develop? Where does she place her hope? What is the basis for her decisions (e.g., re: Lovelace’s first proposals, Letters 107, 137)?

What becomes of Anna’s voice? What kind of topics does she address? Is she a real threat to Lovelace’s plans?

“Once subdued is always subdued”: How do Lovelace’s various statements of his principles affect our interpretation of the story (e.g., Letters 110, 170)? What is the logic of his “trial” theory? What is the effect of Belford’s first and subsequent letters in defense of Clarissa (e.g., L143)? How are we to judge Lovelace’s sincerity (see his own accounts, e.g., L152)?

Both Lovelace and Clarissa are compulsive letter-writers: how does the act of writing and the written object become the focus of the narrative (e.g., Letters 175, 198, 229)?

As Lovelace’s plots become more elaborate, what is the status of fiction and the value of authorship (and interpretation)? See, e.g., Letters 103, 131, 211, 214, 229.

Key words: PRIDE, LOVE, TRIAL, REVENGE, DELICACY, INTEGRITY, HARD-HEARTED, MISUNDERSTANDING
**Third installment**, Letters 232-537 (6 December 1748)

*Dominant voices:* Lovelace (triumphant, defeated), Clarissa (restored, triumphant), Belford

*Themes:* Rape, Death

*Houses:* Moore’s, Sinclair’s, Smith’s

Lovelace as an author-figure (e.g., L232-33); note his various contrivances and control over Clarissa by manipulating truth and controlling information; note Clarissa’s epistolary silence at Hampstead (although vehement verbal defenses).

Clarissa and Lovelace: in the sequence leading to the rape, consider how their relationship has changed (see, e.g., the debates at Hampstead Letters 244-45).

How does the rape affect each character’s sense of self and other (e.g., Letters 259, 261, 264, 281, 295, 321)? What becomes of Lovelace’s “trial” argument and Clarissa’s will (e.g., Letters 259, 261, 279-81)?

After Clarissa’s escape to Smith’s, consider the meaning of suffering and the problem of consolation. How does Clarissa herself interpret her suffering? Into what pattern does she place herself? (See, e.g., her frequent recourse to the Book of Job, Letters 359, 364, 379, 413 etc.)

Belford’s development and his role as witness to Clarissa’s suffering and preparations for death (e.g., Letters 333-36, 364, 413, 419, etc); NB Belford as executor-editor (Letters 389-91)


Clarissa and Anna: NB Anna’s cruel letters (Letters 275.1 and 310); her advice to marry Lovelace (and Clarissa’s responses to Letters 327, 358); Anna’s correspondence with Arabella Harlowe (Letters 351-7); Hickman’s visit to Clarissa (Letters 365-6); Anna’s encounter with Lovelace (L367). Consider Letters 473.1-2, the last exchange between Clarissa and Anna: what has changed since Letters 1-2? Anna’s viewing the body (L502) and her character sketch of Clarissa (L529). [see also Morden’s account of female friendship, L520]

Harlowe family: their reaction to the rape and intimations of her death (Letters 376, 378, 392, 402, 406-8, 432, 459, 461-2, 483-5); the return of Cousin Morden (to Harlowes: L431, to Lovelace: L442, to Clarissa: Letters 447, 474); the aftermath (Letters 500-4, 508, 537).

Clarissa’s death as an act of signification: consider her deceptive letter to Lovelace (“my father’s house,” L421.1), her coffin (L451), her final words and letters (Letters 465, 473, 481) her posthumous letters (Letters, 488-92, 510.4, 518), her will (L507) and the “publication” of her story (Letters 372, 379, 428, 507 [the will, p. 1418], 515); contrast the other death scenes in the final installment: Belton (Letters 419, 424) and Sinclair (Letters 493, 499)

The Postscript: to what genres and authorities does Richardson appeal to defend his work?

Key Words: MEDIATION, ACCOMMODATION, PENETRATION, LAW, SINCERE, DIGNITY, DESTINY, PERSONATE, PROTECTION, BROKEN HEART, ENLARGEMENT, DISSOLUTION.