

How to Write a Literary Analysis

Understanding the Task and Getting Started

Literary analysis is a skill in which the elements that make up a whole unit are examined. The unit can be a poem, a short story, an essay, a novel, an advertisement, artwork, or a film. Consider that authors (and their editors) make many choices that result in what the audience sees, how the work can be interpreted, and how it affects readers. Analysis helps readers to understand how a piece of literature works and how it conveys specific ideas or creates specific effects on readers.

Think like a scientist who examines the individual aspects of a specimen. For literary analysis, the elements to consider are the following:

Title	Figurative Language	Tone
Diction	Imagery	Exposition (order of ideas)
Setting	Structure	Prose Style
Characterization	Plot, Action, Pacing, and	Scansion
Metaphor	Timing	Allusions and References

As a writer, you are asked to do the same thing as the scientist—make careful observations about the different elements of a literary work, such as theme, setting, character, or plot. Remember that you are making these observations for a reason, which is the claim or *thesis statement* that you set up in the introduction. The details and examples of your analytical investigation will become the supporting evidence that proves your essay's central claim or thesis.

Collecting the Information and Cataloguing the Elements

Completing a successful analysis involves time to inspect the work. For literature-based assignments, read the work once to become familiar with just the surface details, like characters, plots, setting, etc. This initial reading will help you to identify the specific and objective **facts and evidence** that will help to support your interpretation of the text. Facts and evidence, in this context, are what actually appear on the page (words, the actual text and the obvious concrete details the text conveys, such as the basic plot).

There are two main types of information that can be collected during the text exploration process: **Subjective** and **Objective**. Both types have value when analyzing literature; however, it is important to understand the difference to avoid writing a personal essay and to ensure the focus remains on literary analysis.

Subjective information is often gathered from your first reading of the material or during the journaling and prewriting phase of literary analysis. Subjective information is personal in that it reflects an individual's response to something. It is important to recognize that your reading of the text is in itself subjective. Feelings that arise while reading are often useful in generating the **initial** connections between what you already know about an aspect of the human experience and what is expressed in the work. While reading, annotate this subjective information in the margins of your text. Much of this data may be unrelated when you write your essay, but by taking notes, the idea will be preserved in case it is needed later. Once you have completed your initial read, go back through the subjective reactions you experienced to analyze your response and narrow your thoughts to an objective and specific argument that can be supported with textual evidence.

Objective information is verifiable within the text and will be the focus of your literary analysis. If you can see it, then another person can too, as opposed to subjective thoughts and feelings which can't be proven. **Objective information stays closely connected to the text and will be the material used to support the argument being developed.** This type of information identifies the specific literary devices being explored and examines how and why the specific details of the literature are working to express the idea or theme you will present in your analysis. Various types of details from the text lend **concrete** support to the development of the central idea of your literary analysis essay. These details add credibility to the point you are developing.

Once you have identified a general claim and the objective information to support it, think about how the parts relate to one another and how they relate to the development of the deeper meaning or theme. This phase will help you to narrow your focus and craft your argument. **Ask questions about how the individual elements of the work relate to a specific theme or overall effect.** The questions you ask will be specific to the topic and work you selected, but some general examples are:

- Which literary device are you exploring?
- How is the literary device being used?
- What impact does this literary device have on the development of the text?
- Which evidence is present to support your interpretation of the impact?

For help constructing your argument, see the Academic Success Center's our Thesis Statement, Introduction, Conclusion and other literary handouts.

The Parts: Where They Go and How They Work

The Title

It is very important to choose a title for your literary analysis that is different from the title of the literary work being explored. It is also important not to call it "Literary Analysis of [title]." Instead, it is essential that you give your essay a title which is descriptive of the approach you are taking in your paper. Try to get the reader's attention by providing a glimpse into what the paper is going to do. For example, will it examine or explore? Are you stating that the text is an allegory or satirical representation of something or someone? An example of a strong title might be "The Odysseys of Max and Mickey: Imagery and the Immigrant Experience in Sendak's *In the Night Kitchen* and *Where the Wild Things Are*."

The Introduction and Thesis Statement

The thesis can be described as the main point, central argument, or the focus of the paper, but more than that, it can often give some indication as to what proof you intend to use and the order in which that proof may be presented in the body of the essay. Your thesis statement should be a clear and direct claim and should entice your audience to read further. Each subsequent paragraph in the body of your paper should support your thesis statement and prove your claim. For more information on Introductions and Thesis Statements, see the Academic Success Center's Introduction and Thesis Statement handouts.

Organization and Essay Structure

As with other types of academic writing, a literary analysis should adhere to the introduction, body paragraphs, conclusion model. *Your argument* and *your voice* must carry the weight in a literary analysis paper. Therefore, avoid plot summary, and construct a specific thesis statement that conveys a claim that you will prove in your body paragraphs using textual evidence. Each paragraph must include topic sentences, and these topic sentences, as well as the content of each paragraph, must support the thesis statement. Even if you incorporate research in your paper, be sure that it supports *your own argument* and does not overtake your voice and your position.

Writing Style and Voice

Use formal, academic diction (word choice) in a literary analysis. Therefore, write in the third person. First person (I, me, our, we, etc.) and second person (you, your) are too informal for academic writing, and most literature professors prefer students to write in third person. Refer to your specific assignment for exact guidelines from your instructor.

The Literary Present

Literary works are considered to exist in the present tense. As a result, in academic writing, it is expected that you will write a literary analysis in the present tense.

Differentiation between Speaker and Author

Often in literature, the speaker is not the author. One aspect of literary analysis involves exploring the relationship between author and speaker. Carefully analyze point of view and tone, and consider the impact of the text's construction. Looking closely at the role of the speaker can help readers to understand how the text is working.

Questions to consider when exploring the role of the speaker:

- What "person" is the piece written in?
- Is the narrator omniscient (does the narrator know the thoughts and feelings of all other characters even if they have not been expressed)?
- Is the narrator an active part of the story, or are events being expressed from outside the immediate action?
- How can the author's choices regarding the role of the speaker or narrator affect the characters in the story?

Using Textual Evidence: Integrating Quotations and Proper Citations Effectively

Always introduce the text in the introduction. Give a clear, full reference to the work and its author somewhere in your introductory paragraph.

Throughout your literary analysis, use the correct format for referring to the work you are discussing. The titles of short stories, poems, and essays should be placed in quotation marks; the titles of novels, plays, films, and TV shows should be italicized.

Poem- "My Last Duchess"

Play- *Antigone*

Short Story- "The Secret Lion"

Movie- *Forest Gump*

Novel- *Pride and Prejudice*

Television show- *The Simpsons*

Use quotations sparingly. Remember that quotations are meant to support *your* argument. Therefore, saturating your paper with overuse of quotations will shift the reader's focus away from your ideas. Use only relevant quotations to support your claims, and limit quoting to key statements and ideas.

Integrate quotations smoothly. When you use quotations, work them into your writing as smoothly as possible. This is often referred to as embedding or "sandwiching" quotes. To do so, pay attention to style and punctuation. Use "signal phrases," such as, "according to..." or "Gordon writes..." to introduce a quotation. It is best not to end a paragraph with a quotation. Your own interpretation or analysis should always follow a quotation because, again, your points are the central focus of this type of writing. See the following examples of in-text quotations and citations:

Example 1:

In her essay “The Ghosts of Ellis Island,” Mary Gordon observes, “The minute I set foot upon the island I could feel all that it stood for: insecurity, obedience, anxiety, dehumanization, the terrified and careful deference of the displaced” (392). Gordon uses vivid imagery to blend the historical perspective of the immigrant experience with her personal point of view that these new arrivals suffered a sense of profound dispossession.

Work Cited

Gordon, Mary. “The Ghosts of Ellis Island.” *The Writer’s Presence: A Pool of Readings*.

3rd ed. Edited by Donald McQuade and Robert Atwan, New York and Boston:

Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2000.

1. Introduce the quote to provide context for the reader.

- Include the title and author if you are using the source for the first time.
- Use a “signal phrase” to introduce the quote (author’s name + verb).

2. Direct Quotations and Paraphrasing

- Use a direct quote when an author writes in specialized or particularly powerful language and when such textual evidence enhances your paper’s argument.
- Be precise. Do not use a quote from an outside source (secondary source) if it is not well written or if you can state the point more clearly in your own words. In that case, you might summarize or paraphrase the author’s ideas. If you summarize or paraphrase, you must still cite the source to credit the author. Refer to the Academic Success Center’s Avoiding Plagiarism handout for additional paraphrasing tips.
- Be sure to use proper punctuation for all quotations and citations. See the box below for detailed explanation of punctuation rules.
- You can make use of paraphrase and summary when you need the details of the original piece, but not necessarily the words of the original. Paraphrase to put someone else’s words into your own words. **Paraphrasing will require a citation.** It is important that the author’s ideas remain intact, even if you present that message in your own words.

3. Your Analysis / Interpretation of the Quote

- Explain and discuss how the quoted material is significant. Relate the quote to **your purpose** in your paper.
- Demonstrate that this quote serves to make a particular point in your argument.

Example 2:

The following excerpt is from Jill May’s article, “Theory and textual Interpretation: Children’s Literature and Literary Criticism.”

Young readers can unconsciously understand the signs and codes placed in their illustrations and texts. For instance, Marilyn Apseloff explains, “Children can pore over the pictures and create their own narratives for what is happening beyond the rhymes...” (qtd. in May 85).

Work Cited

May, Jill P. “Theory and Textual Interpretation: Children’s Literature and Literary Criticism.” *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, vol. 30, no. 1, 1997, pp. 81-96.

Important Formatting and Punctuation Notes

Eliminating Words or Lines from a Quote:

You must use **ellipsis** if you omit any words from the original source you are quoting. **Ellipsis** can be used at the beginning, in the middle, or at the end of the quotation, depending on where the missing words were originally. **Ellipsis is formed by either three periods for part of a sentence or four to indicate the omission of a full sentence with a space between each period.** Use a single line of **spaced periods** to indicate the omission of an entire line of poetry.

Formatting Block Quotations:

1. **Prose quotations longer than four lines** should be set off in block quotes, indented one inch from the left margin and double spaced, without quotation marks.
2. **Poetry quotations longer than three lines** should be set off as a block quotation, and double spaced, without quotation marks. The line breaks and punctuation should be as they appear in the original text. Consider that line breaks are an intentional element of poetry that can help to inform the reader. Indicate page numbers for prose and line numbers for poetry.
3. **If you have questions** about citing sources, ask them **before** turning in your paper. Ideally, make an appointment to see your instructor and/or a Writing Tutor.

Punctuating Quotations and Citations:

You will be able to punctuate quoted materials accurately if you observe the following conventions used in writing about literature:

1. When the quoted material is part of your own sentence, place **periods and commas** inside the quotation marks.

Ex. Mr. Jones recounted in the conversation, "He had never seen a more brilliant production of a Shakespeare play."

2. When the quoted material is part of your own sentence, but you need to include a parenthetical reference to page or line numbers, place the **periods and commas** after the reference.

Ex. Jones described in *Great Expectations: America and the Baby Boom Generation* that "demographic transition theory, not to mention sound sociological reasoning, backed it up" (17).

3. When the quoted material is part of your own sentence and contains a question mark or exclamation point, the punctuation appears before the closing quotation mark. Then write the parenthetical citation followed by the punctuation closing the sentence.

Ex. The Duke shows his indignation that the Duchess could like everyone and everything when he says, "Sir, 'twas all one!" (Browning 25).

4. When the original material you are quoting already has quotation marks (for instance, dialog from a short story), you must use single quotation marks within the double quotation marks.

Ex. Lengel tries to stop Sammy from quitting by saying, "'Sammy, you don't want to do this to your Mom and Dad'."

Refer to the Center's citation guides for more complete information about how to properly incorporate and punctuate quotations.

Literary Analysis Checklist

- Is the topic you have chosen to write about manageable for the length of the paper you are writing?
 - Is it too narrow or too broad?
 - Do you have enough material from the text to support sub-points as well as your thesis?
- Is your title engaging? Does it suggest the approach you are taking in your paper?
- Does your first paragraph introduce your topic, name the writer and the work, and end with your thesis statement? Will it get the reader's attention?
- Is your thesis clear? Does it state the central idea of your paper?
- Is your paper organized in a way that your reader will be able to follow?
- Are your developmental paragraphs unified (everything in the paragraph relates to the topic of the paragraph) and coherent (everything in the paragraph is arranged in a logical order)?
- Have you used transitional words where necessary within each paragraph? Are there transitions linking all the paragraphs of your essay?
- Does your concluding paragraph provide a sense of closure?
- Have you used technical terms correctly?
- Have you used brief summary, paraphrase, specific details, and direct quotations? Have you explained why you are using them and how they support your central idea?
- If you have used information from sources outside the actual work of literature (for example, books of criticism), have you documented this information properly? To provide documentation for literary papers, you need to use MLA documentation style, which can be found in most English handbooks and in books on how to write research papers.
- Have you proofread your final draft?