

How to Write Literary Analysis

Literary analysis involves interpreting a work and arguing for a particular way of understanding it. Such analysis is frequently called “literary criticism,” but this phrase does not necessarily mean finding fault with a work of literature. Rather, literary analysis critiques, compares, and judges literary works. An essay of this type includes the following:

Introduction

Always begin by identifying the work and the author. If you are writing a comparison/contrast paper, you would identify both works and authors. Several general sentences precede your specific thesis. You might place the work in the context of other writing by the author. Or you might discuss whether the work is regional or not. There are, for instance, many writers who enjoy setting their novels in particular places, such as the south, west, or the northeast. Stephen King, for instance, sets many of his works in Maine, and William Faulkner created a fictional place known as Yoknapatawpha County in the American South. Writers also often refer to the “genre” or to the type of work, such as general fiction, science fiction, horror, fantasy, western, the mystery, etc. Or you might want to give a very brief presentation of what the work is about or the social influences at the time it was written. If you are writing about two poems, for example, you might want to say that they have similar themes of love and death or appearance versus reality.

In the following introduction, note how the author works from general sentences to a specific thesis sentence. Also note how the tone is set for the essay and how the writer offers the reader some insight into how water imagery might act to define human personality.

The properties of water make it an excellent literary device, especially when water imagery is used to define the character of a woman. Water ebbs and flows, sparkles, reflects, and evaporates. It can carry a vessel, or take the shape of any vessel that holds it. Water can form deep pools, impenetrable and mysterious, or puddle into shallowness. It wears many faces—snow, sleet, and ice and can fall from the heavens as a light rain or a cold rain or a fierce, driving storm. Water falls from the eyes as tears; it can mirror the self; it can quench thirst. As a method of defining character, Charlotte Bronte uses many of these characteristics of water to capture the elusive Lucy Snowe in the 1853 novel Villette. [From: Jordan-Henley, Jennifer. Circumnavigating the Psyche: The Use of Water Imagery in Charlotte Bronte’s Villette. 20 April 1987.]

A Coherent Thesis and Interpretation

Interpretation is the central idea that you are trying to communicate, and it is established in your thesis sentence—often (but not always) the last sentence in your introduction. It should be extremely clear and should be a statement, not a question. Your thesis, according to Axelrod and Cooper, is your “focal point” (566). Every paragraph in the essay should further it and prove it in some way. Additionally, the thesis should give clues about how the paper is organized, and if the paper has a point of view (such as an argumentative paper, which is closely related to literary analysis as the writer is arguing that his or her interpretation be accepted), the writer’s view should be clear. When writing literary analysis, it is often helpful to use one or two of the elements of literature in the thesis. These are key words which the writer can touch on throughout the paper. Several types of thesis sentences are acceptable.

Example 1:

Stephen King updates the age-old story of Scheherazade to further his plot in *Misery*.

This thesis is short and direct. It mentions the author and the book, and introduces the element of literature the writer is going to discuss (plot), along with an earlier story King uses. The reader can expect that the next paragraph will give background on the character of Scheherazade, and that each paragraph in the essay will discuss plot and Scheherazade in some way.

Example 2:

In Henry James’s *The Portrait of a Lady*, the imagery of architecture is used to create characterization.

Again, the thesis is short and direct. The writer thinks that one element is used to enhance another. We would expect the paragraphs that follow to indicate specific examples of how James uses architecture to “build” his characters’ personalities.

Example 3:

Peter Straub’s *A Ghost Story* and Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw* are alike in that they both apply characterization in the same ways: they use multiple viewpoints, they use contradictory explanations of the same events, and they emphasize the changeable nature of their characters.

In this example, two works are compared by using three methods. The reader expects that the next paragraph will discuss Straub’s use of characterization by using multiple viewpoints, followed by James’s treatment in the same way. The writer will then move on to a discussion of contradictory explanations in each work.

Example 4:

The poems “i thank you God,” by e. e. cummings, and “The Swing,” by Robert Louis Stevenson, use visual and tactile imagery to create the sensation of movement.

In this example, two types of imagery will be discussed in two separate works. They will be presented in the order in which they are mentioned in the thesis.

A Background and Context of the Work

It is sometimes necessary to give a brief summary of the work to put it in context for the reader and remind the reader of what the work is about. Writers frequently do this as they go along. For a short paper, however, it may be easier to do so in the paragraph before you begin your interpretation. But remember, you cannot use a quotation without putting it in context. Your reader must know who is speaking and have an understanding of the situation. In addition, it is important to react to the material you cite. Don’t leave your reader hanging, waiting for you to draw conclusions. It is the writer’s job to prove the thesis—not the reader’s.

Without context:

Montague says that Romeo “And private in his chamber pens himself, / Shuts up his windows, locks fair daylight out” (I.i.138-139).

With context:

In the opening act of Romeo and Juliet, Lady Montague inquires of Romeo’s whereabouts, causing Benvolio and Montague to comment about Romeo’s recent behavior. Montague, noting Romeo’s withdrawn attitude, says: “And private in his chamber pens himself, / Shuts up his windows, locks fair daylight out” (I.i.138-139). Montague thus implies that Romeo is prone to secrecy—an important characteristic in that it leads directly to tragedy.

A Reasonable Argument Supported by the Text

Essentially, you are arguing for your interpretation, not so much to persuade your audience to accept your point of view, but “to convince them that it makes sense” (Axelrod and Cooper 566). This “argument” justifies your way of reading the work by pointing to specific details found in the work and explaining their significance. While you have much freedom with interpretation, you must be able to support your assertions from the text, as shown in the example above.

The primary source is the work itself. You should quote from the work, describe it, summarize it, paraphrase it. This does not mean to retell the plot, but you must give a certain amount of detail to put your assertions in context for the reader. Do more than just refer to specific passages. Analyze the word choices and point to particular patterns of meaning. Watch closely for repetition in a work. These clues often exist because an author wants his or her reader to interpret the work in a certain way. Secondary sources refer to other literary analysis about the primary source or the about the author. You may use secondary sources as a groundwork for your own analysis, or you might agree or disagree with the points in secondary sources. A secondary source might also be a biography of an author or one that offers a social history which puts the era into context.

Always balance your essay. You should use both short and long quotations, paraphrasing, and your own commentary. You should never let a quotation stand by itself. Always react to it in some way. Discuss it in terms of your thesis. And always introduce your quotations. Don’t just stick them in as an afterthought. For further help in this area, read *MLA: Using Sources Correctly*.

A Clear Pattern of Organization

Remember that your thesis, if written well, will give your reader an idea of how your essay is organized. But clear organization goes further. Your reader should have no difficulty understanding your interpretation or following your argument throughout your paper. Your writing must be clear and direct, providing effective transition statements and using key words to keep readers oriented throughout the essay. Then revise your sentences. Be as picky as a poet in finding the right word. Read the essay aloud (slowly) to discover potential problems and refer back to the thesis when reviewing every paragraph. Make sure that each paragraph proves or furthers your thesis in some way.

A Creative or Original Voice

The quickest way to impress your reader is to come up with new ideas. By discussing a point in your paper that has not been discussed in class, writers indicate involvement and interest. Avoid boring the reader by stating the obvious or by using ordinary and empty words. Stretch yourself to use professional language and to consider other viewpoints.

Attention to Format Details

Misquoting, plagiarism, and neglecting to follow your instructor's assignment instructions are usually indicative of a lazy mind and blasé attitude. Such an attitude is easily revealed in a student paper, so beware of presenting this posture to others. Pay attention to details. They count.