

# Writing Center

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## Literary Analysis Guidelines

Works of literature can be analyzed in numerous ways. In general, an analysis of a poem, play, or short story, or novel focuses on a single aspect of the work with a developed thesis that makes a judgment about that aspect and its significance.

### Selecting a Topic

In selecting a topic to analyze, relate it to an overall theme of the work or to the work as a whole. Consider the various elements that contribute to the meaning of the work, such as conflict, narrative points of view, characterization, setting tone, mood, foreshadowing, imagery, style, and symbolism.

### Audience

Assume that the readers of our paper are adults like your classmates and have already read the work discussing. Therefore, plot summary or retelling the story or a paraphrase of the poem is usually unnecessary. Check with your professor whether to include a summary.

### Source

Most student literary analyses use no outside sources. If permitted or required to use a source other than the work being analyzed, document all source references correctly according to the most recent conventions of the Modern Language Association or the style required by your teacher.

### Some Approaches

Some approaches you can take in analyzing a literary work are:

**Discuss** the conflict(s) or tension(s) within a character or between two characters describing:

1. The origins of the conflict within a character or between two characters.
2. The element(s) that bring the tension to a climax.
3. How the conflict is resolved – murder, compromise, resumption of old tension.

**Compare and contrast** a character in one work with a character in the same or a different work, describing:

1. How Character X is like Character Y, their physical, psychological, or social similarities/differences, and the significance of these traits.
2. How the characters react in comparable or different ways to the pressures on them.
3. The character more carefully realized or described in the work, which character is more powerful and compelling, and why.

**Discuss the motivation** that causes a character to perform an action or to make a decision explaining:

1. Why Character X acted the way he did and whether he was motivated by heredity.
2. What clues about his motives are given in the work.
3. Why readers are sympathetic or critical of him.

**Discuss the relationship** between character and theme, describing:

1. Whether the character is pompous or untrustworthy or self-sacrificing.
2. The setting limits the work's message of universality and, if so, in what ways.
3. Details of the setting have an impact on the characters, the events, and the meaning.

**Discuss special techniques(s)** the author uses for example, point of view, flashbacks, symbols or imagery, irony, humor, satire, tone, surprise endings, surrealism, dialect, or stereotypes.

1. In a paper on a work's point of view describe:
  - a. The point of view from which the work is told, identifying the narrator as well as the literary classification.
  - b. The effect(s) of the point of view on the selection of details and the manner in which the details are presented.
  - c. The effect(s) the point of view has on the reader, in other words, the attitudes and judgments readers make based on the perspective from which the work is told.
2. In a paper on *narrative or dramatic method* explain:
  - a. How the reader's understanding of a work is affected by how the chronology of incidents and/or the sequence of events is presented.
  - b. The part coincidence plays in the work.
3. In a paper on *symbolism* (you should narrow your focus to a single symbol), describe:
  - a. The major symbols in the work.
  - b. When and where they occur.
  - c. The impact of the symbols and the meanings they reinforce.
4. In a paper on *irony*, describe:
  - a. The major irony, contradiction, or reversal in the work.
  - b. The event(s) or person(s) that cause the irony.
  - c. Other ironical elements that reinforce the central irony.
5. In a paper on *tone*, tell whether:
  - a. The tone or attitude or the teller's "voice" is bitter, angry, tolerant, amused, earnest or casual.
  - b. The narrator's tone is the same as or different from that of the author.
  - a. In "The Lesson" by Tom Cade Bambara, Sylvia's character is transformed from a wisecracking, street smart adolescent to a thoughtful woman determined to break away from the bonds of her environment.
  - b. The catacombs provide the perfect setting for Edgar Allan Poe's "The Cast of Amontillado" because the darkness of the underground vaults parallels the darkness of the deed committed by Montesor also, the description of the family burial are foreshadows Fortunato's death.
  - c. In "Gerontion," T.S. Elliot presents the house and the city as symbolic microcosms for spiritual emptiness in the modern world.

**Structure** your analysis in standard essay format

- a. The Introduction sets the tone for your paper, establishes the significance of the work and your analysis, and clearly identifies the work, the author, and the thesis.
  - 1) Provide an interesting opening. Several approaches are possible.
    - a) A quotation from the work to set the tone and reflect your thesis.
    - b) A generalization about the work's meaning that relates to your thesis, perhaps a comment on the universality of that time.
    - c) A brief plot summary, no more than a few sentences, to establish the context of your discussion, if your teacher wishes to include a summary or a paraphrase.
  - 2) Present your thesis statement at the end of the first paragraph, including an advance summary of the way you plan to develop the topic.

**Write** body paragraphs that fully support and develop your thesis with sufficient explanations and illustrations.

- a. Write a clearly focused topic sentence for each paragraph.
  - b. Offer clear, fully developed explanations and interpretations to support your point.
  - c. Illustrate your statements with select short quotations from the work, but do not rely too heavily on quotations. When you do quote, explain how the quotation relate to the point you are making.
  - d. Organize your support according to the logic of the concepts you are discussing rather than according to the chronology of the work. Arrange points emphatically or casually rather than chronologically.
  - e. If writing a comparison/contrast, use the special structure for that type of essay (usually the alternating or point-by-point system). For a comparison or contrast to be coherent, it must draw the connection with appropriate transitions and explanations.
  - f. The connection between and among the parts of your essay must be clear with transitions, repetition of key terms and concepts, and other coherent devices.
1. The concluding paragraph restates the thesis and adds appropriate generalizations about the work.

2. Use, unless otherwise instructed, the MLA parenthetical in-text documentation for all quotations from the work and for all references to other sources, such as critical articles and books.

**Proofread** carefully for grammatical and mechanical accuracy after you have written a draft that is logically organized, fully developed, and clearly expressed.

**Prepare your final paper** in standard manuscript format.

1. Type your name, course information, and submission date in the upper right or left corner of your paper unless your teacher requests a title page.
2. Title your paper appropriately, using a phrase that clearly identifies your topic and approach and center you title on the line. Name the author and the work in your title; however, neither can be your title. Example: Breaking Away from the Ghetto: Sylvia's New Perspective in "The Lesson" by Tom Cade Bambara.
3. Double-space throughout on one side of white bond, 8 ½ by 11 paper, leaving one-inch margins.
4. Number pages in the upper right corner.
5. Staple once in the upper left corner unless your teacher requests a folder or binder.