

Writing a Literary Analysis Paper

The Purpose of a Literary Analysis:

A literary analysis is not merely a summary of a literary work. Instead, it is an argument about the work that expresses a writer's personal perspective, interpretation, judgment, or critical evaluation of the work. This is accomplished by examining the literary devices, word choices, or writing structures the author uses within the work. The purpose of a literary analysis is to demonstrate why the author used specific ideas, word choices, or writing structures to convey his or her message.

How to Create a Literary Analysis:

1. **Read the text closely several times.** Focus on the ideas that are being presented. Think about the characters' development and the author's writing technique. What might be considered interesting, unusual, or important?
2. **Brainstorm a list of potential topics.** Highlight important passages in the text and take notes on these passages. Later, when writing the paper, these notes should help a writer to remember which aspects of the story caught his/her attention. The topic chosen should always be based on a writer's interpretation of the author's message. Here are some things a writer may want to consider when brainstorming for a literary analysis.
 - ❖ **Character:** What observations might a writer make about the characters? Are there discrepancies in what they think, say, or do? Are the observations a writer makes different from what other characters say? How does the author describe the characters? Are the characters "dynamic" (a dynamic character is a character that undergoes important changes throughout the work)? Are the characters "static" characters (a static character is a character that stays the same throughout the work)? Are the characters "flat" characters (a flat character is a character that does not have vivid character traits) or "round" characters (a round character is a character that has vivid character traits)? Are the characters symbolic or representative of some universal quality? Is it possible that two characters in the text might be compared or contrasted?
 - ❖ **Setting:** Is there a relationship between the work's setting and its mood? Does the setting reflect the work's theme? How does the setting impact the characters? Does a change in the setting affect the mood, characters, or conflict?
 - ❖ **Plot:** How might the beginning of the work be interpreted? How does the plot build suspense? Does the author use techniques such as foreshadowing or flashback? Are there patterns of cause-effect relationships? Do events occur in a logical order? Examine the events that lead to the climax and determine how the work ends?

- ❖ **Theme:** What is the major idea or theme of the work? How does the author relay this theme? Is there a greater meaning to the details given? How do the characters' moods affect the theme? What allusions are made throughout the work? Are there repeating patterns or symbols? What does the title say about the theme?
 - ❖ **Dialogue:** What is the purpose of the dialogue? Is the dialogue appropriate in terms of word choice or sentence length? How does the dialogue impact the characterization? How does the author use the dialogue to show the mood of the characters? How does this aid the author's message? How does the dialogue impact the plot?
 - ❖ **Imagery:** In what way might a specific image or series of images be analyzed? How might the development of images throughout the work be explained? Are the images important to the meaning of the work? How are images interrelated with other literary elements?
 - ❖ **Figures of speech:** How are figures of speech such as similes, metaphors, and hyperboles used throughout the text? How are these figures of speech important in relation to the meaning of the text? Are figures of speech interrelated between other literary elements?
 - ❖ **Tone:** How might the attitude of the author or the tone of the work be described? Is the tone serious, playful, casual, formal, or somber? How does the author achieve this tone? How does the tone impact the author's message? Does the author say one thing but mean another? Does the author take the subject seriously or treat it lightly?
 - ❖ **Rhyme/Rhythm:** Do the author's words, sentences, or paragraphs seem to share a similar rhyme pattern? What type of rhythm does the author seem to be creating? How is this rhyme/rhythm impacting the author's message? Does the author use the different rhymes/rhythms as a sound device for the literary work? How does the author do this?
 - ❖ **Point of View:** What point of view do the characters display? First, second, or third? How does this point of view affect the theme, plot, or conflict of the work? How might the author's point of view impact a writer's analysis? Might the character's first person point of view draw a writer to feel as though he/she is hearing a personal account and cause him/her to feel an intimate connection with the character? Might the author's third person account cause a writer to feel as if the author is acting as the narrator of the story? Or might it cause a writer to believe that the narrator is an omniscient being who is distant but knows the character's thoughts and feelings?
3. **Think about what the author is trying to say.** Why is this important? When viewing this work as a piece of art, what might a writer's response be? What might a writer's reactions be to the ideas presented in the work? Are these ideas truthful or relevant to today and how? If a writer were asked what they thought of this work how might they respond? What points might a writer make?"
4. **Select a topic that has sufficient supporting evidence.** A writer should make sure to include specific details to support the topic. Use highlighted sections of the book as evidence to support the topic that has been chosen.

5. **Write a working thesis.** The analysis will need a strong thesis that states a writer's perspective but also allows it to be debated. The thesis should state a writer's opinion, but it should also allow readers to arrive at their own conclusions.

❖ Example of a **debatable thesis**:

Pride and Prejudice is about Elizabeth Bennet's effort to overcome her own proud behavior and discrimination towards Mr. Darcy, as well as how her family is affected by the haughtiness and preconceptions of the society around them.

(This is a debatable thesis because it asks the reader, "Does Elizabeth actually exhibit haughtiness and preconceptions? Is this why she doesn't get along with Mr. Darcy? How is Elizabeth's family affected by the haughtiness and preconceptions of the society around them?")

❖ Avoid a **non-debatable thesis**:

Pride and Prejudice is about five sisters and their journey to find love.

(This thesis is non-debatable because it is undisputable. The paper is framed as a summary rather than as a literary analysis.)

6. **Make an extended list of evidence.** Find more evidence from the text to support the working thesis. Then select the evidence that will be used in the paper.
7. **Refine the thesis.** Make sure the thesis fits with the evidence that has been presented.
8. **Organize the evidence.** Match the evidence to the order of the thesis. Delete any of the original textual supports that may no longer follow the thesis, and gather new evidence if needed.
9. **Interpret the evidence.** When writing a literary analysis, it is very important for writers to make sure they express their own personal interpretation of the work. Be careful that the literary analysis is not a summary.
10. **Create a rough draft.** When writing a rough draft, there are several methods that may aid a writer in creating a strong final draft. Here are a few methods:

- ❖ **Outline:** An outline will help a writer to organize his/her thoughts and ideas. It will remind a writer of the order of the thesis, as well as the supporting points he/she would like each topic sentence to have.
- ❖ **Free-write:** A short, ten minute free-write will help to get all of a writer's thoughts on paper. It will allow a writer to focus on the content, rather than the punctuation and spelling. Once the free-write is complete, a writer can read through it and circle the points that are strong, as well as omit the ones that are not.

- ❖ **Bubble Map:** A bubble map will allow a writer to draw connections from one idea to the next. It will give a writer a visual idea of the direction of the literary analysis, as well as help a writer to see the connections between the topics. This can help a writer transition from one topic to another more fluidly.

11. Revise the Analysis. After completing the first draft, revise the analysis by considering the following questions:

- ❖ Is the thesis clearly stated in the first paragraph?
- ❖ Is the sentence structure varied?
- ❖ Does the structure of the analysis emphasize the main ideas?
- ❖ Is the third-person point of view used throughout the entire essay?
- ❖ Has the present tense been used to discuss the work and past tense to describe the author's background?
- ❖ Have quotation marks been used around direct quotations?
- ❖ Have the sources been cited correctly according to MLA style?
- ❖ Has extraneous information that does not support the thesis been eliminated?
- ❖ Have clear transitions been used between sentences and paragraphs?

12. Proofread. Once the content of the essay is well-developed, it should be proofread for grammar, punctuation, and spelling. It is often helpful to read the paper slowly and clearly out loud. If possible, another person should listen and read along as the paper is being read. The paper should be printed and proofread several times until an accurate final copy is created. Be alert to common grammatical errors such as sentence fragments, comma splices, or run-on sentences. Remember to consult a style manual for grammatical or citation questions, and if further assistance is desired, group workshops and individual appointments are available free of charge through Tutoring Services.