



Learning Centre

Writing a Literary Analysis Paper

When you write a literary analysis, you explain the qualities, components, and meanings that make up a literary work.

Literary analysis is a mode of writing that requires you to communicate your own interpretation of the literature, using both convincing explanation and sufficient evidence to show that your interpretation of the work is sound.

Here's an example interpretation of the first stanza from William Wordsworth's poem, "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud:"

Poem

*"I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host, of golden daffodils;
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze."*

Interpretation

The speaker in the poem appreciates how different elements of nature are interconnected. This is demonstrated by the observation of "a host, of golden daffodils" (4) grouped together with other elements of the earth like trees, water, and wind. The poet contrasts his own isolation as a lonely wanderer (1) to how these elements fit together as a group.

Sometimes it may feel as though your instructor has already told you what the text means, but keep in mind that there are always new ways to look at a text. In fact, your instructor will expect you to learn to do this—to explain your take on what is going on in a given piece of literature.

The information in this handout is meant to introduce you to strategies and concepts that will help you write your own literary analysis of texts.

Writing the Analysis

Craft a working thesis

The most important step to begin developing your essay is to write a working thesis. A working thesis is simply the overall point you are trying to make about the text you are analyzing, and possibly a few supporting points that back up that primary point.

This thesis will set the foundation of your analysis and provide direction for your writing. At this point, don't feel pressured to finalize your thesis statement. Some of your ideas will likely change as you attempt to develop and support your argument in your paper because the act of writing will help you think through your argument, so it's okay for a thesis to evolve as you write the paper. It's not often that a writer can produce a well-crafted thesis that doesn't change before the final draft. However, it's crucial to start by creating a "working thesis" so that you stay focused in your writing on developing and supporting the primary claim that you are making about the work of literature.

Here's an example of a working thesis:

"This passage is important in the poem because it contains themes of community and religion that make Beowulf's character seem human."

This working thesis helps the author by establishing that the key topic or focus of the paper will be the humanizing of Beowulf's character. The key concepts that will be used to support this claim are the "*themes of community and religion*." This working thesis gives the author a plan for what they will show or argue in the paper. Now, look at the final version of the thesis statement that evolved once the author finished writing the paper:

"This passage is key in the poem's composition because its communal and religious themes show Beowulf's mortality, reinforcing the heroic protagonist as an icon of hegemonic masculinity."

This final version is significantly different from the working thesis. For example, you should notice how the author has refined the word choice and structured the thesis differently. More importantly, while writing the paper, the author came to realize what they really wanted to argue—that this passage portrays Beowulf as "*an icon of hegemonic masculinity*."

Choosing Evidence

A thesis requires evidence that supports the claim. As lawyers need to provide evidence and explanation in court cases, a critical analysis needs to demonstrate that evidence exists to back up the claim that the author is making. When deciding what evidence to use from the literary work, it's important to check your working thesis

statement and ask yourself, “Does this evidence support my thesis statement’s argument?” If it doesn’t, you have two options:

- Leave out evidence that takes you off topic—even if the evidence seems interesting or strong, if it doesn’t directly relate to your argument, leave it out. Including ideas that are off topic will make an essay seem unfocused and disorganized.
- Refine the thesis so that you can use the evidence to support your analysis. For instance, the example you’re looking at may contain a literary device like *symbolism*, but your thesis statement doesn’t mention *symbolism* as support for your argument. If you want to support the argument with this example, you should refine the thesis to include *symbolism* as a main supporting idea.

Presenting your evidence

To present your evidence, you can choose between quotation, paraphrase, and summary. Which one you choose depends on the point you are supporting. When the way the author worded the text supports your point, then quotation is the best approach, as in explicating the author’s choice of wording in a poem. However, when discussing plot or character development in a short story, summary and paraphrase tend to work better to back up a point you are making.

A principle to keep in mind is that you should not overuse quotations. Quotations are most useful when you are explaining or demonstrating the author’s word choice as part of your argument. Otherwise, depend more on paraphrase and summary to back up your interpretation.

Interpret your evidence

Explaining your evidence is an important part of supporting your argument. You must explain specifically how your evidence supports your claim. With a quotation, for example, you should indicate what words or elements specifically relate to and support your argument. Take a look at this example:

Community is important to Beowulf’s character because it associates him with his people, making the idyllic hero more relatable to Anglo-Saxon men. This key theme is established when Beowulf is identified as “the son of Ecgtheow” (David and Simpson 1550), highlighting his family roots. Having knowledge of Beowulf’s family line causes his character to fit more closely with the Anglo-Saxons. This notion of belonging continues to develop in the line expressing that the Geats would have lost “their warrior” (David and Simpson 1551). Preceding this passage, Beowulf has already been proclaimed a hero and saviour with unmatched strength, yet here he is simply a warrior. In contrast, warrior is a much more inclusive distinction in that Beowulf is labelled equally with the other Geat warriors. As a result, Beowulf’s heroic character becomes more relatable to the average man.

Notice how the author of this paragraph uses quotations to identify specific words, which he then goes on to explain with complete sentences. The explanations all attempt to show a connection between the quoted examples and the paragraph's main idea about "community" and "Beowulf's character."

In the next example, the evidence is used a little differently. The author relies on a block quotation to highlight a particularly important passage from the text. This allows him to present a lot of evidence all at once and then follow up with a detailed discussion:

As Arthur learns that Guinevere's execution caused the death of his knights, he reverts to his emotional self and overflows with grief, revealing his attitude towards his regal station. Arthur swoons for "very pure sorrow" (David and Simpson 488), and during his lamentation, he mourns the loss of fellowship and denounces his kingship:

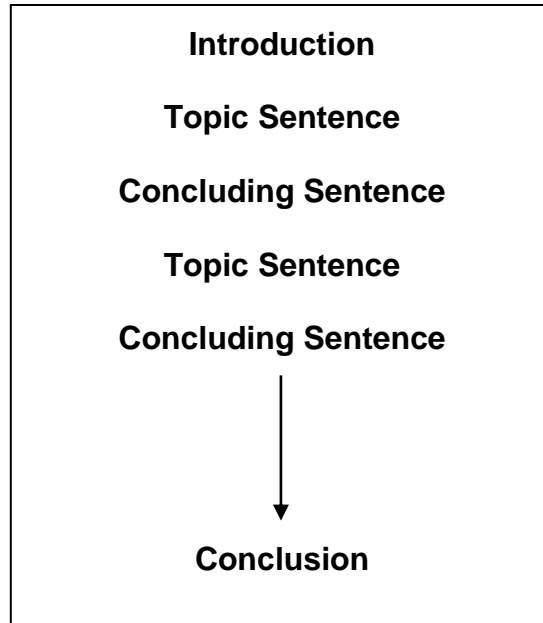
Alas, that ever I bore a crown upon my head! For now have I lost the fairest fellowship of noble knights that ever held Christian king together. Alas, my good knights be slain and gone away from me. Now within these two days I have lost nigh forty knights and also the noble fellowship of sir Lancelot and his blood, for now I may nevermore hold them together with my worship. Alas, that ever this war began! (488)

Arthur's immediate reaction is to complain about his crown, suggesting that his kingship is to blame for everything. This illustrates Arthur's growing inclination to choose fellowship over kingship; for, if he was not king, war with Lancelot would not have been necessary, and the fellowship of knights would not have been dismantled. Moreover, with complete disregard for Lancelot and Guinevere's adultery, Arthur laments the loss of his knights and even Lancelot himself. Clearly, Arthur does not wish to punish Lancelot and the Queen, even if it is his duty to do so, and this signifies again that remaining loyal to his companion is more important than his kingship. This passage represents a key stage in Arthur's personal conflict because it solidifies his antagonism towards the crown. Because Arthur is the quintessential icon of a righteous king, his averse attitude towards the throne represents a critique of political leadership. Thus, Malory's contempt for the unreliable polity is conveyed by Arthur's desire to be a loyal companion, rebelling against his stately position and image.

Notice how the author spends time discussing multiple parts of the block quote to support his argument. This is an important thing to remember: if you're going to insert a block quote into your paper, you should justify that decision by explaining in detail how it is important to your main argument. Your reader will not appreciate it if you make them read a long quote and don't follow up with an adequate explanation. Conversely, they will respect your use of evidence if you manage to provide strong explanation for how the evidence demonstrates your claim, relating ideas back to your thesis statement.

Checking for Coherence

Once you've developed the body of your paper's analysis, the last step before editing is to ensure your analysis is coherent. A great strategy is to try reading just the main ideas (not the explanations) throughout your paper. This means reading the thesis statement, then the topic and concluding sentence of each paragraph, and then the conclusion paragraph. In a sense, you're checking the framework of your paper.



Checking your paper's main points with this top-down strategy is to ensure your paper sticks to the same argument/topic from beginning to end. For your paper to be coherent, it should conclude on the same argument the paper begins with.

The Writing Approach

So far, you've been introduced to writing a literary analysis paper. Before writing a first draft, however, there are some important writing approach concepts you should be familiar with. Here are a few key things to keep in mind when writing essays on literary works:

1. Assume that your audience has already read the story or poem that your essay is about. A frequent weakness in student papers is too much re-telling of the story. Only mention and explain events from a story if the event provides evidence for a point you are making. Otherwise, refrain from simply re-telling what is said in the text.
2. Become familiar with literary devices such as plot, character, setting, imagery, symbolism, diction, point of view, foreshadowing, and themes, as well as the many poetic devices, such as metre, rhyme, and alliteration. Literary analysis

essays are frequently about how the author of the literary work used some of these literary devices. For example, your essay might present an argument about how a character develops throughout a novel, demonstrating an important theme in the story. Having knowledge of these devices will help you choose what to write about in your essay.

You can easily look up any of these literary terms and concepts online.

3. Writing about literature involves standing back and thinking about the text like a piece of art, as an art appraiser stands back and critiques a painting. As the analyzer, your task is to share your own interesting ideas about the artwork. How do its components work together? What technique does the painter use to achieve a certain effect or purpose?

For example, try to imagine that you are an experienced painting critic. When you make critical observations, you're not going to just tell someone that the ocean in the painting is dark blue. Anyone can look and see for themselves that the colour is dark blue. Rather, you might say that the ocean's dark blue brings other light coloured features to the forefront of the painting, which supports your main argument that the painting symbolizes a conflict between light and shadow.

Similarly, your literary analysis should point to specific qualities of the text that create certain effects, and it should explain why these effects are important to your paper's overall analysis.

Other Resources

Here are some related Douglas College Learning Centre handouts:

WR4.60 How to Read Literature as you Prepare to Write a Literary Analysis Essay

RS4.10 Elements for Analyzing Fiction

RS4.20 Discovering Themes in Literature

Here is a website link with more introduction to literary analysis:

<https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/618/01/>