

Credits to Ms. Berkani

LESSON FIVE: Types of Essays – Literary Analysis

Literary analysis means closely studying a text, interpreting its meanings, and exploring why the author made certain choices. It can be applied to novels, short stories, plays, poems, or any other form of literary writing.

A literary analysis essay is not just a summary of the plot or a book review. Instead, you need to analyze elements such as the language, perspective, and structure of the text, and explain how the author uses literary devices to create effects and convey ideas.

1.1. Definition

A literary analysis essay is a type of essay which includes an argumentative analysis of a piece of literature. In this kind of essay, the author examines the book, novel, play, etc. analyzing the idea, plot, characters, tone, writing style, devices which the writer uses to narrate his story.

2. Writing Tips

As any other assignment, this type of task requires some preparations, careful meticulous work. However, having a good plan you can make the process easier.

2.1. Reading the text and identifying literary devices

The first step is to carefully read the text and take initial notes. As you read, pay attention to the things that are most intriguing, surprising, or even confusing in the writing – these are things you can dig into in your analysis.

Your goal in literary analysis is not simply to explain the events described in the text, but to analyze the writing itself and discuss how the text works on a deeper level. Primarily, you're looking out for *literary devices* – textual elements that writers use to convey meaning and create effects.

To get started with your analysis, there are several key areas that you can focus on. As you analyze each aspect of the text, try to think about how they all relate to each other. You can use highlights or notes to keep track of important passages and quotes.

- **Language choices**

Consider what style of language the author uses. Are the sentences short and simple or more complex and poetic?

What word choices stand out as interesting or unusual? Are words used figuratively to mean something other than their literal definition? Figurative language includes things like **metaphor** (e.g. “her eyes were oceans”) and **simile** (e.g. “her eyes were like oceans”).

Also keep an eye out for **imagery** in the text – recurring images that create a certain atmosphere or symbolize something important. Remember that language is used in literary texts to say more than it means on the surface.

- **Narrative voice** :Ask yourself:
 - **Who** is telling the story?
 - **How** are they telling it?

Is it a *first-person narrator* (“I”) who is personally involved in the story, or a *third-person narrator* who tells us about the characters from a distance?

Consider *the narrator’s perspective*. Is the narrator *omniscient* (where they know everything about all the characters and events), or do they only have partial knowledge? Are they an *unreliable narrator* who we are not supposed to take at face value? Authors often hint that their narrator might be giving us a distorted or dishonest version of events.

The *tone* of the text is also worth considering. Is the story intended to be comic, tragic, or something else? Are usually serious topics treated as funny, or vice versa? Is the story realistic or fantastical (or somewhere in between)?

- **Structure:** Consider how the text is structured, and how the structure relates to the story being told.
 - Novels are often divided into chapters and parts.
 - Poems are divided into lines, stanzas, and sometime cantos.
 - Plays are divided into scenes and acts.

Think about why the author chose to divide the different parts of the text in the way they did.

There are also less formal structural elements to take into account. Does the story unfold in chronological order, or does it jump back and forth in time? Does it begin *in medias res* – in the middle of the action? Does the plot advance towards a clearly defined climax?

With poetry, consider how the **rhyme** and **meter** shape your understanding of the text and your impression of the tone. Try reading the poem aloud to get a sense of this.

In a play, you might consider how relationships between **characters** are built up through different scenes, and how the **setting** relates to the action. Watch out for **dramatic irony**, where the audience knows some detail that the characters don’t, creating a double meaning in their words, thoughts, or actions.

2.2. Coming up with a thesis

Your thesis in a literary analysis essay is the point you want to make about the text. It’s the core argument that gives your essay direction and prevents it from just being a collection of random observations about a text

2.2.1. Example thesis statement for a literary analysis essay

Mary Shelley uses shifting narrative perspectives to portray Frankenstein in an increasingly negative light as the novel goes on. While he initially appears to be a naive but sympathetic idealist, after the creature’s narrative Frankenstein begins to resemble – even in his own telling – the thoughtlessly cruel figure the creature represents him as.

Remember that you can revise your thesis statement throughout the writing process, so it doesn’t need to be perfectly formulated at this stage. The aim is to keep you focused as you analyze the text.

2.2.2. Finding textual evidence

To support your thesis statement, your essay will build an argument using *textual evidence* – specific parts of the text that demonstrate your point. This evidence is quoted and analyzed throughout your essay to explain your argument to the reader.

It can be useful to comb through the text in search of relevant quotations before you start writing. You might not end up using everything you find, and you may have to return to the text for more evidence as you write, but collecting textual evidence from the beginning will help you to structure your arguments and assess whether they're convincing.

3. Writing a title and introduction

To start your literary analysis paper, you'll need two things: a good title, and an introduction.

3.1. The title

Your title should clearly indicate what your analysis will focus on. It usually contains the name of the author and text(s) you're analyzing. Keep it as concise and engaging as possible.

A common approach to the title is to use a relevant quote from the text, followed by a colon and then the rest of your title. If you struggle to come up with a good title at first, don't worry – this will be easier once you've begun writing the essay and have a better sense of your arguments.

3.1.1. Example title for a literary analysis essay

"Fearful symmetry": The violence of creation in William Blake's "The Tyger"

3.2. The introduction

The essay introduction provides a quick overview of where your argument is going. It should include your thesis statement and a summary of the essay's structure.

A typical structure for an introduction is to begin with a general statement about the text and author, using this to lead into your thesis statement. You might refer to a commonly held idea about the text and show how your thesis will contradict it, or zoom in on a particular device you intend to focus on.

Then you can end with a brief indication of what's coming up in the main body of the essay. This is called signposting. It will be more elaborate in longer essays, but in a short five-paragraph essay structure, it shouldn't be more than one sentence.

3.2.1. Example introduction for a literary analysis essay

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is often read as a crude cautionary tale about the dangers of scientific advancement unrestrained by ethical considerations. In this reading, protagonist Victor Frankenstein is a stable representation of the callous ambition of modern science throughout the novel. This essay, however, argues that far from providing a stable image of the character, Shelley uses shifting narrative perspectives to portray Frankenstein in an increasingly negative light as the novel goes on. While he initially appears to be a naive but sympathetic idealist, after the creature's narrative Frankenstein begins to resemble – even in his own telling – the thoughtlessly cruel figure the creature represents him as. This essay begins by exploring the positive portrayal of Frankenstein in the first volume, then moves on to the creature's perception of him, and finally discusses the third volume's narrative shift toward viewing Frankenstein as the creature views him.

Some students prefer to write the introduction later in the process, and it's not a bad idea. After all, you'll have a clearer idea of the overall shape of your arguments once you've begun writing them!

If you do write the introduction first, you should still return to it later to make sure it lines up with what you ended up writing, and edit as necessary.

4. Writing the body of the essay

The body of your essay is everything between the introduction and conclusion. It contains your arguments and the textual evidence that supports them.

4.1.Paragraph structure

A typical structure for a high school literary analysis essay consists of five paragraphs: the three paragraphs of the body, plus the introduction and conclusion.

Each paragraph in the main body should focus on one topic. In the five-paragraph model, try to divide your argument into three main areas of analysis, all linked to your thesis. Don't try to include everything you can think of to say about the text – only analysis that drives your argument.

In longer essays, the same principle applies on a broader scale. For example, you might have two or three sections in your main body, each with multiple paragraphs. Within these sections, you still want to begin new paragraphs at logical moments – a turn in the argument or the introduction of a new idea.

- **Topic sentences**

To keep your points focused, it's important to use a topic sentence at the beginning of each paragraph.

A good topic sentence allows a reader to see at a glance what the paragraph is about. It can introduce a new line of argument and connect or contrast it with the previous paragraph. Linking words like “however” or “moreover” are useful for creating smooth transitions

- **Using textual evidence**

A key part of literary analysis is backing up your arguments with *relevant evidence* from the text. This involves introducing quotes from the text and explaining their significance to your point.

Good literary analysis essays contain an explanation of your ideas and *evidence* from the text (short story, poem, play) that supports those ideas. Textual evidence consists of *summary, paraphrase, specific details, and direct quotations*.

The skillful use of textual evidence - summary, paraphrase, specific detail, and direct quotations - can illustrate and support the ideas you are developing in your essay. However, textual evidence should be used judiciously and only when it directly relates to your topic. The correct and effective use of textual evidence is vital to the successful literary analysis essay.

5. Writing a conclusion

The conclusion of your analysis shouldn't introduce any new quotations or arguments – instead, it's about wrapping up the essay. Here, you summarize your key points and try to emphasize their significance to the reader.

A good way to approach this is to briefly summarize your key arguments, and then stress the conclusion they've led you to, highlighting the new perspective your thesis provides on the text as a whole

5.1.Example conclusion for a literary analysis essay

By tracing the depiction of Frankenstein through the novel's three volumes, I have demonstrated how the narrative structure shifts our perception of the character. While the Frankenstein of the first volume is depicted as having innocent intentions, the second and third volumes – first in the creature's accusatory voice, and then in his own voice – increasingly undermine him, causing him to appear alternately ridiculous and vindictive. Far from the one-dimensional villain he is often taken to be, the character of Frankenstein is compelling because of the dynamic narrative frame in which he is placed. In this frame, Frankenstein's narrative self-presentation responds to the images of him we see from others' perspectives. This conclusion sheds new light on the novel, foregrounding Shelley's unique layering of narrative perspectives and its importance for the depiction of character.

6.Examples of Literary Essay Topics

6.1.Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is the chilling tale of young Marlow's voyage up the Congo River. There he meets the wicked ivory trader Kurtz. The book explores the themes of imperialism and racism. It also questions the civility of Western society over supposedly savage indigenous people.

6.2.Mark Twain is one of the great American writers and satirists. But his masterpiece *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* delved into themes and topics that are among the most serious of any literary analysis essay topics. These include freedom versus slavery and man versus nature.

6.3.Fate in *Romeo and Juliet*: We all know that Romeo and Juliet were the archetypal star-crossed lovers. Throughout the text of this famous work, Shakespeare makes it quite clear that their love is doomed by fate.

6.4. Social standing and wealth are the two key themes of one of Austen's most beloved novels, *Pride and Prejudice*. In this book, the protagonist, Elizabeth Bennet must choose between two suitors. One is a personable man. The other is better established in society, though less kind.