APSU Writing Center

Literature Analysis Essay

What is a Literary Analysis?

- A literary analysis is an essay that examines, interprets, and evaluates a work of literature (short story, poem, play, or novel).

- Rather than summarizing the plot, a literary analysis makes an argument about how and why a text was written and what meaning or message it conveys.

- This argument is supported with evidence from the text itself.

Summary vs. Analysis

Summary:	Analysis:
Restates the main ideas and events without argument or interpretation.	Builds an argument by examining how literary elements create meaning, show causes, effects, and significance.

Questions to Consider:

- What is your argument about the text?

- Is your argument clearly stated in a thesis statement?

- Do your body paragraphs consistently support your thesis with evidence and analysis?

General Guidelines

- Do not retell the story. Assume your reader is familiar with the text.

- Focus on analysis and critical thinking, not plot summary.

- Literary interpretation is open unless the author's intent is explicitly known.

- Always write about literature in the present tense.

- Narrow your focus to a specific element such as theme, characterization, symbolism, imagery, setting, or style, and explain its significance to the overall work.

How to Write a Literary Analysis

Choose a Focus or Topic

- Select a central idea or theme (a message, claim, or insight) to analyze.

- **Ask yourself:**

  - What main idea does the author want the reader to take away?

  - What idea seems most important or meaningful?

- **Example:** In *Romeo and Juliet* by William Shakespeare, a central theme is forbidden love.

Analyze Key Literary Elements

- Support your main idea by examining specific elements of the text.

  - **Plot:** Main conflict and key events; how they drive the story

  - **Setting:** Time and place; how they affect meaning

  - **Characters:** Protagonist, antagonist, motivation, and development

  - **Point of View:** First-person, third-person, etc., and its impact

  - **Style:** Word choice, sentence structure, and form

  - **Figurative Language:** Metaphors, similes, imagery, irony

  - **Theme:** Central ideas explored in the text

  - **Symbolism:** Objects or actions that represent deeper meaning

  - **Tone and Mood:** Author's attitude and the emotional effect on the reader

Structure of a Literary Analysis Essay

Title

- Create an original, relevant title.

- Do not use the title of the literary work as your essay title.

Introduction

- Identify the full title of the work and the author's full name

  - Short stories and poems: in quotation marks

  - Plays and novels: italicized

- Provide brief background or context as needed

- Include a very brief plot summary (3–4 sentences maximum)

- End with a clear, arguable thesis statement (not a statement of fact)

Common Pitfalls in Thesis Writing

- Writing a thesis that is too broad or obvious

- Weak: Love is an important theme in *Romeo and Juliet*.

- Stronger: In *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare portrays forbidden love as both transformative and destructive, suggesting that intense emotion can overpower reason and social order.

- Writing a thesis that only summarizes the plot instead of making a claim

- Writing a thesis that lists topics without explaining their significance

Body Paragraphs

- Begin with a topic sentence that supports the thesis

- Focus on one main idea per paragraph

- Use textual evidence (paraphrase or short quotes) to support claims

- Clearly explain how your evidence connects back to your thesis

Common Pitfalls in Body Paragraphs

- Drifting away from your central argument

- Ending paragraphs with a quote

- Ending paragraphs without explaining how the evidence supports your thesis

Using Quotes Effectively:

- State your point

- Introduce the quote with a signal phrase

- Explain how the quote supports your argument

The "Quote Sandwich" Method

- Point → Quote → Analysis

    - **Example:** Shakespeare emphasizes Romeo's impulsive nature early in the play. When Romeo first sees Juliet, he immediately declares, "Did my heart love till now? Forswear it, sight!" (1.5). This dramatic shift reveals how quickly Romeo abandons his previous feelings for Rosaline, reinforcing the idea that his love is driven by intense emotion rather than thoughtful consideration.

Common Pitfalls When Using Evidence

- Beginning or ending paragraphs with quotes

- Letting quotes stand alone without analysis

- Using quotes to summarize the story

Conclusion

- Revisit the thesis in new wording

- Summarize key ideas without repeating body paragraphs

- Explain the significance of your analysis

Common Pitfalls in Conclusions

- Introducing new topics

- Using direct quotes

- Writing phrases like "In conclusion"

APSU Writing Center
Literature Analysis Essay Outline

Introduction: Introduce the work and author, provide brief context, and present a clear thesis.

Body Paragraph 1 (Plot): Analyze a key event to show how it develops the central theme.

Paragraph 2 (Character): Analyze how a character's development supports the theme.

Paragraph 3 (Point of View): Explain how the narrative perspective shapes meaning.

Paragraph 4 (Figurative Language): Analyze figurative language and its effect on theme or tone.

Conclusion: Restate the thesis in new words and explain why your analysis matters.

APSU Writing Center

References

Bucks County Community College. (2007, October 15). *How to Write a Literary Analysis Essay.*

https://www.bucks.edu/media/bcccmedialibrary/pdf/HOWTOWRITEALITERARY

ANALYSISESSAY_10.15.07_001.pdf

Lewis University Writing Center. (2019, March 21). *Writing a Literary Analysis.*

https://lewisu.edu/writingcenter/pdf/final-writing-a-literary-analysis3212019.pdf

PLU Writing Center. (n.d). *Literature Analysis.* Pacific Lutheran University.

https://www.plu.edu/writingcenter/literature-analysis/

University of Arizona Writing Center. (2024). *Summary vs. Analysis.*

https://writingcenter.uagc.edu/summary-vs-analysis

University of Wisconsin - Madison Writing Center. (2024). *A Short Guide to Close Reading for*

Literary Analysis. https://writing.wisc.edu/handbook/closereading/