



Literary Analysis

Literary analysis is an academic genre in which works of literature or other texts (e.g., video, article, advertisement) are examined, interpreted, and evaluated. In this genre of essay, the writer analyzes the theme, plot, characters, tone, and any other devices employed by the author. A literary analysis is typically a thesis-driven essay, meaning the writer must construct a specific argument that makes a claim about the impact and/or the significance of the methods used by the author to present what they intended to communicate.

Components of a Literary Analysis

- **An introduction, body, and conclusion.** This is the typical structure maintained in most types of academic writing; however, it will most likely take more than five paragraphs to set out a point of view and then back it up with examples from the text. The essay should include as many body paragraphs as needed to effectively convince a reader of the argument's validity.

- **Introduction**

- **A brief summary.** When writing a literary analysis, a writer usually includes a *brief* summary to introduce the audience to the text being analyzed. This occurs in the introduction to inform the reader about the context before the analysis begins.

Guidelines for a Summary in Literary Analysis

- Mention only the most important aspects of the plot, characters, or themes to be analyzed.
- If possible, omit any of these aspects that will not be discussed in the analysis.
- Do not directly quote text or use in-text citations in the summary portion of the paper.
- Write the summary portion in the present tense, regardless of when the text was written.
- Be concise. A summary should be significantly shorter than both the original text and the analysis.
- It is important to remember that the analysis is the point of the paper; this may mean limiting the summary or adding more depth to the analysis. (For more detailed information, see the University Writing Center's handout on [Summary vs. Analysis](#).)

- **A precise thesis statement.** This is a declarative statement presenting the writer's reading or interpretation of a text. It is typically placed at the end of the essay's introduction, though its position within the first paragraph may vary. It succinctly establishes the argument the writer will make about the work being analyzed. All of

the body paragraphs in the essay must directly connect to the thesis statement. (For more detailed information, see the University Writing Center's handout on [Creating a Thesis Statement](#).)

○ **Body**

- *Specific evidence from the text.* The body of the essay must incorporate direct quotes from the piece being analyzed. The quotes used should illustrate a specific literary component or rhetorical device (see **Elements of a Text** below) that applies to the claim in the thesis statement.
- *Deconstruction and analysis of the direct quotes.* Each direct quote pulled from the text must be deconstructed and analyzed. Deconstruction requires the writer to select specific words or phrases within the quote and connect them to an element of the text. Once the quote has been deconstructed, the writer then analyzes how the quote connects to and supports the argument stated in the thesis.

How Is an Analysis Different from a Summary?

- The writer has an opinion about or a unique insight into the work, and the analysis serves to make an argument for that point of view.
- Elements of the text are discussed in detail to back up the writer's opinion.
- There is a specific reason for choosing details from the text to analyze.
- Aspects of the plot are not necessarily analyzed one by one in chronological order (unless there is a good reason for doing so). Some can be skipped.

○ **Conclusion**

- A wrap-up of the argument lays out the thesis and how the writer has supported it. It might include an overview of the significance of the text or notes on areas for further study.

Elements of a Text

This list includes the most common textual elements analyzed in a literary analysis. (There are other elements of a text beyond this sample collection.)

- **Setting.** The setting of a piece of literature is the time and location in which the story takes place. Aspects of the setting may include but are not limited to social status, weather, historical events, and details of immediate surroundings.
- **Plot.** The plot of a story consists of the events that occur during the course of the story and how they are presented to the reader.
- **Theme.** The theme is the central idea of the text; for example, a writer may argue that the theme of Shakespeare's *Othello* is jealousy.
- **Characterization.** Characterization is the act of creating and describing characters in literature. Characterization may include, but is not limited to, descriptions of a character's physical attributes, personality, or how a character acts, thinks, and speaks.

- **Conflict.** Conflict is the result of competing desires or the presence of obstacles that need to be overcome.
- **Point of View.** Point of view shows a reader the setting, plot, and characterizations from a particular character's perspective.
- **Tone.** Tone is a way of communicating to a reader an author's attitude toward a subject. Tone is generally conveyed through the author's word choices and how the words are phrased.
- **Symbolism.** Symbolism imbues objects with meanings that are different from their original meaning or function. Authors may use symbolism to connect certain things that may initially seem unimportant to more universal themes.
- **Allegory.** An allegory is a text with more than one level of symbolic meaning used to express large, complex, and abstract ideas.
- **Figurative Language.** Figurative language is any rhetorical figure of speech that depends on a non-literal meaning of some or all of the words used. Examples of figurative language include *simile*, *metaphor*, and *personification*.
- **Imagery.** Imagery consists of descriptive language that allows the reader to better imagine the world the author creates in the text.
- **Foreshadowing.** The author drops hints about events to come. They may be broad, obvious hints, which a reader picks up on right away, or they may be very subtle. A reader may not notice these until a second (or third) reading of the text.
- **Connotation.** The connotation of a word refers to the emotional or cultural associations the word carries in addition to its dictionary definition.
- **Denotation.** The denotation of a word is the actual definition of the word rather than the nuances of its meaning or the feelings it implies.
- **Simile.** A simile compares two unrelated subjects using "like" or "as."
- **Metaphor.** A metaphor compares two subjects without using "like" or "as," and asserts a correlation between two unrelated things.

Additional Tips

- Always finish reading the text before summarizing and analyzing. There may be a plot twist!
- Most of what is presented in a literary analysis should be original ideas, interpretations, and judgments.
- Quotations from the text need to support the writer's original insights. Stay on task, and don't overload the analysis with them.
- Keep in mind the goals of the analysis. These may change with progress through the essay.
- Remember that most writing requires steps leading toward the final version—brainstorming, researching, drafting, and revising. Don't expect to complete all of these the day before (or the same day as) the essay is due.