

Read, Think, Interpret

- A literary analysis is **not a summary of a plot**. A literary analysis expresses a student's interpretation or critical evaluation of a novel, short story, poem, or play. The student's explanation requires research into the **primary source** (the work being analyzed) and often requires references from **secondary sources** (critical works by others).
- A literary analysis requires students to **study** an author's work and to **think** about **how and why** it was written.
- The purpose of a literary analysis is to **interpret** an author's message and demonstrate why or how that author used specific ideas, language, plot, or characterization to convey the message.

Summary vs. Analysis

- **Summary focuses on a text's plot**

“*Romeo and Juliet* is a play about two young lovers who cannot stay together because of a family feud. The two main characters fall in love at a party, marry in secret and commit suicide at the end of the play.”

- **Summary only requires remembering events in a text**

“Boxer, the hardworking horse in *Animal Farm*, helps build Napoleon's tower. After Napoleon destroys his own tower, Boxer helps rebuild it.”

- **Summary usually strings events in chronological order**

“In *The Great Gatsby*, protagonist Nick Carraway moves to the West Egg in Long Island, where he befriends Jay Gatsby, a millionaire with a mysterious past. Carraway eventually discovers that Gatsby is a bootlegger. Three characters die by the end of the novel.”

- **Summary makes no “higher-order” conclusions about a text, literature or life**

“*Jude the Obscure* by Thomas Hardy is a powerful Victorian novel about an impoverished stone mason who wants to receive a university education.”

- **Analysis focuses on a text's ideas/concepts that a reader must discover**

“*Romeo and Juliet* explores conflict between an individual and surrounding social forces and structures, such as parents, customs and laws.”

- **Analysis requires serious and careful thought**

“Boxer, the hardworking horse in *Animal Farm*, represents the resilient but uneducated Russian proletariats who, like Boxer, lost their lives supporting a tyrant's cause.”

- **Analysis “connects the dots,” or uses evidence in a text to make a conclusion about what the text “means”**

“Gatsby's trail of destruction—a broken marriage, murder, and suicide—in *The Great Gatsby* highlights the indirect and direct consequences of early 20th century American greed and excess.”

- **Analysis makes “higher-order” conclusions about a text, life or literature**

“A reader can understand *Jude the Obscure* by Thomas Hardy to be a critique against social institutions, such as universities and churches, that uphold class division.”

Some Interesting Possibilities

If you have freedom of choice, an analysis of a literary work may include any of the following:

- How the various components of an individual work relate to one another: plot, characterization, language.
- How two separate literary works deal with similar concepts: either comparing and contrasting works from a same author or two works from two separate authors.
- How concepts in a literary work relate to larger aesthetic, political, social, economic, or religious contexts.

A Universal Approach

What is your impression of the **author's purpose**? Is the work written to be entertaining, informative, philosophical, argumentative, or a combination?

Then consider the following questions as possible starting points.

- **Do you agree with the ideas** presented in the work? Why or why not?
- Does the author's imaginative environment seem **realistic** and engaging? How? Why?
- **How does this work compare** to other works by the same author? To works by other authors?
- Does the work **reflect any historical, sociological, religious, or psychological concerns**?
- Do you agree with evaluations of the work by **other critics**? If not, why?

Elements to Consider: Point of View

- Does the narrator speak in first person ("I") or in third person? Why?
 - **First person:** I was astounded when I reached the top of the mesa and saw the Anasazi ruins below.
 - **Third person:** She was astounded when she reached the top of the mesa and saw the Anasazi ruins below.
- If there is a first-person narrator, is that person a major character or a minor character observing the main action?
- If the narration is in third person, is the narrator omniscient (able to see anything and tell us what is in the characters' minds), or is there limited omniscience so that readers see into the mind of only one character?
- Does the point of view change?
- How does the point of view impact the story or theme?

Elements to Consider: Plot

- Are there **major and minor events**? How are they related?
- **Is time a factor in the plot**? Does the story unravel in chronological order? If not, why not? Are any later incidents foreshadowed in the story? Are flashbacks used? If so, why?
- **Is the story logical**? Does the plot depend on coincidence, or does it develop from the characters' actions?
- **What are the conflicts**? Are they internal conflicts (psychological, theological) or external conflicts (sociological, biological, or environmental)?
- **Are conflicts resolved**? Is there a surprise conclusion? Is the conclusion plausible, satisfying?

Elements to Consider: Theme

A theme is the main idea or an underlying meaning of a literary work; it may be stated directly or indirectly.

Examples

Love	War	Tragedy	Mystery	Betrayal	Revenge
Ambition	Courage	Fear	Prejudice	Suffering	Justice
Truth	Loyalty	Duty	Freedom	Happiness	Religion

- Does the title of the work suggest a theme?
- Are themes revealed through the plot or personalities (actions, dialogue) of the characters?
- Are there other symbols, images, and/or descriptive details in the work that suggest themes? Look for repeated words and images as clues.

Elements to Consider: Setting

Examples of Settings

Historical Period

Season

Time of Day

Location

- What is the setting of the work? Is there more than one?
- What mood or atmosphere (gloomy, tense, cheerful) is created by the setting?
- Why has the author chosen the setting? Does the setting simply provide a backdrop, or is it symbolic? If so, of what?

Elements to Consider: Character

- Are the characters **believable**? Why or why not?
- Is there one protagonist (main character) or several? Does the story have traditional heroes or heroines (protagonists) and villains (antagonists)?
An antagonist can be anything in conflict with the protagonist, such as nature.
- Are the main characters **dynamic** (evolve, change, or learn something), or do they remain **static** (unchanging)? How? Why?
- Does the author **reveal characters** through the comments and thoughts of other characters or through the characters' own actions, words, and thoughts? How do the characters help convey the theme?

Delving Deeper into Character

- **How do the secondary and minor characters function** in the story? Do they provide parallels or contrasts with traits of the main characters?
- If dialect or colloquial **speech** is used, what is its effect?
- Are the **social classes and occupations** of the characters significant? Does the social, economic, political, or religious environment affect the characters and support the theme?
- What are the most **important traits** of the main characters? What is the author's attitude toward the characters? Are readers supposed to sympathize with the characters or condemn them?

Elements to Consider: Imagery, Symbolism, and Tone

- What **images** (any details that appeal to the physical senses) are used in the work?
 - Are the **images literal** (a description of an old man) or **figurative** ("He was as old as the hills")?
 - Are there **repeated images** or related images (light and dark)? If so, what is the significance?
- Are **symbols** conventional ones (spring symbolizing a new beginning, the color red representing passion) or unusual (the sea symbolizing life in Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*)? Symbols are often open to the reader's interpretation.
- What is the prevailing **tone** of the work? How does the author feel about the work? How does the author make the reader feel about the characters? Sympathetic? Humorous? How does this tone affect the story?

A Novel Approach

- **Step 1: Know the Assignment** — If you are assigned to analyze a novel, you are being asked to identify your reaction to the work and develop a clear explanation of your reaction, providing supporting arguments. You will be required to provide support from the novel, as well as from secondary sources (books, articles, etc.).
- **Step 2: Take notes** — As you read the novel, take notes of anything you find interesting about the plot, characters, or any other elements. Be sure to note page numbers for future reference.
- **Step 3: Review** — Read your notes to see if you can find a pattern that will provide a thesis and supporting details for your paper. Examine secondary sources for clues and support for your thesis.

The Short Story

- **Step 1: Know the Assignment** — If you are assigned to analyze a short story, you are being asked to identify your personal reaction to the work and develop a clear explanation of your reaction, providing supporting arguments. You might be required to provide support from external sources (books, articles, Web sites, etc.).
- **Step 2: Read** — Read the entire story, trying to identify the writer's main idea.
- **Step 3: Review** — Summarize the story in your own words, using no more than two sentences.
- **Step 4: Read the story a second time** to analyze how the author has supported his or her ideas. Take notes, including page numbers for future reference.

A Poem

- **Step 1: Examine the title** — Is it indicative of a conflict or a human condition? Is it symbolic of something else? Is it sarcastic, satiric, humorous, or serious? Is it descriptive? Why do you think the author chose it?
- **Step 2: Read the poem — What images are evoked?** Are there any indications of the meaning? What is the topic? The setting? The voice (the speaker)? Is there a historical or cultural link?
- **Step 3: Look for structure** — Is there an organization? A sequence? Rhyme scheme?
- **Step 4: Consider the mood** — What is the author's attitude toward the subject?
- **Step 5: Study the ending** — Where has the poem taken you? How did it affect you?

A Play



- **Step 1: Note the genre** — Is the play tragic? Humorous? Insightful?
- **Step 2: Study the major characters** — Who is the protagonist? Antagonist? How do the characters relate to one another? What is their function in the plot?
- **Step 3: Determine the conflict** — Is the conflict external (man vs. man) or internal (man in conflict with self)?
- **Step 4: Note the language** — **Dialogue is central to any play.** How does the author use language to develop the characters? Advance the plot?
- **Step 5: Reveal the theme** — What is the significance of the play? How is the theme revealed through the characters? The plot? The dialogue?

Writing Is a Matter of Time

- Start thinking about your paper **as soon as possible**.

- **Writing an essay takes time.** That's why writing is often referred to as a **process**. In other words, there are several stages to go through before you can complete a **successful** essay.



The Writing Stages

1. Select a topic
2. Collect information (research, notes)
3. Formulate a thesis statement
4. Create an outline
5. Write a rough draft
6. Revise (edit for content and style)
7. Proofread

Simple Strategy for Writing an Analysis Essay

1. Decide the author's main idea. Sum up the author's theme (main idea) in a single sentence. Use that information to create a thesis statement.
2. Determine which elements (point of view, characters, plot, etc.) seem important and supportive of your thesis statement.
3. Make an outline that includes your thesis and main ideas.
4. Write an introduction: Include the full name of the literary work and author and the author's purpose (your thesis).
5. Write the paper: Each body paragraph can address one aspect (character, plot, etc.) of the work being analyzed. The topic sentence of each paragraph should state the aspect. Then give support, citing specific examples.
6. Draw a conclusion: In the concluding paragraph, give your opinion of how successful the author has been in achieving his purpose. Include a summary of the elements discussed in your paper.