

How to Write a Literary Analysis Essay

The purpose of a literary analysis essay is to carefully examine and evaluate a work of literature. Why do we do this? Examining the different elements of a piece of literature is not an end unto itself, but rather a process to help you develop the ability to read between the lines, organize your thinking, and express your ideas more clearly and convincingly.

Writing is the sharpened, focused expression of thought and study. As you develop your writing skills, you will also improve your perceptions and increase your critical abilities.

Writing ultimately boils down to the development of an idea. Your job is to support the idea you are developing.

Writing must stick with great determination to a perspective. This kind of writing demands tight organization and control. Therefore, your essay must have a central idea (thesis), it must have several topics that grow out of the central idea, and everything in it must contribute to the reader's understanding of that central idea.

THE ELEMENTS OF A LITERARY ESSAY

The Thesis Statement

The thesis statement tells your reader what to expect: it is a precisely worded declarative sentence that states the purpose of your essay -- the point you are trying to make. Without a carefully conceived thesis, an essay has no chance of success.

Typically, the thesis statement falls at the end of your introductory paragraph. It says something about your topic and makes a debatable claim. Take a side or make a claim that others might disagree with. It should be insightful and not immediately obvious to others. It should be neither too specific nor too broad. Think about the reader of your essay and ask yourself, "What would it take to convince me of this thesis statement?"

Most frequent problems in thesis statements:

Problem	Example	A Better Thesis
It identifies the topic, without saying anything about the topic. It's not a sentence that would appear in the conclusion of your essay once you've proven your point.	In this paper about <i>The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson</i> by Mark Twain, the roles of different people will be examined.	By switching her baby with her master's baby in Mark Twain's <i>The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson</i> , the fair-skinned slave Roxanne gives her baby a far different fate in life, yet it doesn't really benefit him in important ways.
It's a question you're trying to answer, rather than an answer to the question. Solution: answer the question.	In Nathaniel Hawthorne's <i>The Scarlet Letter</i> , the character of Reverend Dimmesdale could be seen as either good or bad.	In Nathaniel Hawthorne's <i>The Scarlet Letter</i> , Reverend Dimmesdale is portrayed as a deeply flawed but good man.
It's vague.	In C. S. Lewis's <i>The Voyage of the Dawn Treader</i> , Eustace Scrubb symbolizes mankind.	In C. S. Lewis's <i>The Voyage of the Dawn Treader</i> , Eustace Scrubb symbolizes sinful man redeemed by the love and sacrifice of Jesus, and changed by that love.

Problem	Example	A Better Thesis
It's a true but obvious statement.	<i>Bilbo's journey in <i>The Hobbit</i>, by J. R. R. Tolkein, causes him to grow as a person.</i>	<i>Bilbo's journey in <i>The Hobbit</i>, by J. R. R. Tolkein, shows us the value of facing our fears and doing what's most difficult because it results in strength of character.</i>
It's a preview of the essay's contents rather than a true thesis.	<i>This essay will show that David Copperfield, the protagonist in Charles' Dickens's novel by the same name, is conflicted and lacks wisdom.</i>	<i>David Copperfield, the protagonist in Charles' Dickens's novel by the same name, is a complex character who does not acquire wisdom until later in life, and whose mistakes until then are potentially irreversible.</i>
It's unprovable. Solution: make a claim that CAN be supported or proven by the text.	<i><i>Silas Marner</i>, by George Eliot, is a complex but endearing story about redemption.</i>	<i><i>Silas Marner</i>, by George Eliot, is a story about how collecting and hoarding do not enrich us, but letting go and giving to others is the path to a blessed life.</i>
It's weakened with unnecessary qualifiers like "I believe," "I think," and "In my humble opinion." Solution: state your claim and let it stand.	<i>I think John Steinbeck's <i>Of Mice and Men</i> was a poignant story of friendship, loyalty, but the real message is how dangerous suspicion and prejudice can be.</i>	<i>John Steinbeck's <i>Of Mice and Men</i> was a poignant story of friendship, loyalty, but the real message is how dangerous suspicion and prejudice can be.</i>

Compare your thesis to this list to be sure it's not a weak thesis statement.

The Introduction

The introduction to your literary analysis essay should try to capture your reader's interest. Write an intro that gives the read a reason to want to read the essay. This is a "grabber." Use a quotation, provocative question, brief anecdote, startling statement, or combination of these.

Introduce your topic and add background information relevant to your thesis and necessary for the reader to understand the position you are taking.

The Body of the Essay

The term regularly used for the development of the central idea of a literary analysis essay is the body. In this section you present three to five paragraphs that support your thesis statement. Good literary analysis essays contain an explanation of your ideas and evidence from the text that supports those ideas. Textual evidence consists of summary, paraphrase, specific details, and direct quotations. When you make references to the text, you are doing so to remind your audience of something they already know. The principle emphasis of your essay is to draw conclusions and develop arguments. Be sure to avoid plot summary.

Each paragraph should contain a topic sentence, which states one of the topics associated with your thesis, combined with some assertion about how the topic will support the central idea. The purpose of the topic sentence is twofold:

1. To relate the details of the paragraph to your thesis statement.
2. To tie the details of the paragraph together.

The substance of each of your developmental paragraphs (the body of your essay) will be the explanations, summaries, paraphrases, specific details, and direct quotations you need to support and develop the more general statement you have made in your topic sentence.

“Blend” your body paragraphs by writing transitions from one paragraph to the next. This avoids abrupt changes of subject from one paragraph to the next. The transition language can appear at the end of the previous paragraph or the beginning of the next paragraph.

Remember, every paragraph must relate back to the thesis statement.

The Conclusion

Your literary analysis essay should have a concluding paragraph that gives your essay a sense of completeness and lets your readers know that they have come to the end of your paper. Your concluding paragraph might restate the thesis in different words, summarize the main points you have made, or make a relevant comment about the literary work you are analyzing, but from a different perspective.

Do not introduce a new topic in your conclusion. Imagine you are writing this paper for someone else who has also read the book you are analyzing, but perhaps he or she has not thought about it in exactly the same way. Thus, it is not necessary to “retell” the work of literature in any way. It is your role to be the explainer or interpreter of the work—to tell what certain elements of the work mean in relation to your central idea (thesis).

USING TEXTUAL EVIDENCE

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 only when it directly relates to your topic.

The correct and effective use of textual evidence is vital to the successful literary essay. When supporting your thesis with textual evidence, use words such as, “this shows that” or “this proves that” or “indicating once again that”

If a key event or series of events in the literary work support a point you are trying to make, you may want to include a brief summary, making sure that you show the relevance of the event or events by explicitly connecting your summary to your point.

Paraphrase

You can make use of paraphrase when you need the details of the original, but not necessarily the words of the original: paraphrase to put someone else's words into your own words.

Direct Quotations

Quoted material will make your points more convincing. As with all the textual evidence you use, make sure you explain *how the evidence is relevant*—let the reader know why the quotes you cite are significant to your argument.

Here are guidelines and examples that should help you effectively use quotations:

Brief quotations should be carefully introduced and integrated into the text of your paper. Put quotation marks around all quoted material.

When you introduce the quote using the author’s name, write it this way:

EXAMPLE 1: Brothers Grimm writes, “The clock struck one and Cinderella realized it was time to go” (147).

EXAMPLE 2: Smith introduces Peter by writing, “Have you ever seen a man more handsome?” (22).

When you do not name the author when introducing the quote, name the author at the end of the sentence in the citation.

EXAMPLE: "The boys gathered around the fallen bird and wondered who should take the first step in making sure that it was no longer alive" (Lane 129)

If you are summarizing you do not need a page number.

Lengthy quotations should be separated from the text of your paper. More than four lines of prose should be double spaced and indented ten spaces from the left margin, with the right margin the same as the rest of your paper. NOTE: Do not use quotation marks to set off longer passages because the indentation indicates that the material is quoted.

Use ellipses if you omit any words from the original source you are quoting. Ellipses can be used at the beginning, in the middle, or at the end of the quotation, depending on where the missing words appeared in the original text.

Ellipses for omitted text in the **middle** of a sentence are formed by using three periods with a space on either side.

EXAMPLE: "The greatest lesson ... is to know that even fools are right sometimes."

Ellipses for omitted text at the **end** of a sentence are formed by using four periods with a space before.

EXAMPLE: "Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the king ..."

Observe the following conventions when using direct quotes:

1. When the quoted material is part of your own sentence, place periods and commas inside the quotation marks.

EXAMPLE: According to the narrator of "The Secret Lion," change was "like a lion," meaning that its onset is sudden and ferocious.

2. When the quoted material is part of your own sentence, but you need to include a reference to page numbers, place the periods and commas after the reference.

EXAMPLE: The narrator of "The Secret Lion" says that the change was "like a lion" (Rios 41).

3. When the quoted material is part of your own sentence, punctuation marks other than periods and commas, such as question marks, are placed outside the quotation marks, unless they are part of the quoted material.

EXAMPLE (not part of original): Why does the narrator of "The Secret Lion" say that the change was "like a lion"? *The question mark is placed after the quotation marks because it does not appear in the original -- it ends a question being asked about the story.*

EXAMPLE (part of original): The Duke shows his indignation that the Duchess could like everyone and everything when he says, "Sir, 'twas all one!" (Browning 25). *The exclamation point is placed inside the quotation marks because it appears in the original.*

4. When the original material you are quoting already has quotation marks, use single quotation marks within the double quotation marks.

Example: "Peter answered, 'Well, sir, if things are real, they're there all the time.' 'Are they?'" said the Professor; and Peter did not quite know what to say."

BRITISH LITERATURE

Literary Analysis Essay

STEP-BY-STEP DIRECTIONS

- Choose your book
- Read it all the way through, preferably in one sitting, to get a sense of it from introduction to resolution.
- Write down a few theses that could be your paper's theme. Look for meaning, ideas and commentary about big issues such as life, relationships, duplicity, truth, war, redemption, greed, sacrifice, courage, betrayal, love, revenge, justice, loyalty, duty, etc.
- Read the book again, taking notes. Make observations and ask questions. As you read through, search for supporting scenes, plot points and quotes for your thesis.
- Select your final thesis and outline your paper. State your thesis, then use bullet points to arrange your statements and supporting material from the text.
- Draft your paper. Begin with an introductory paragraph that states your thesis and "hooks" the reader. Then draft the supporting text references from your outline, to form the body of your paper.
 - Check your paper for references to yourself and delete them.
 - Make sure your opening paragraph ENDS with your thesis statement.
- Edit and refine your paper. Write your conclusion. Be sure every supporting quote references your thesis. Review capitalization, word choice, grammar, and punctuation.
- Hand in your final draft.

BRITISH LITERATURE

Literary Analysis Essay

OUTLINE

Book Title/Author: _____

- I. Opening: Brief and general description of the book, followed by thesis statement
- II. Introductory paragraph: “hook” the reader with an interesting fact or question, and tell enough of the story so that a reader WHO HAS READ THE BOOK understands your thesis.
- III. Paragraph 1
 - A. Topic (make sure it points back to the thesis statement)
 - B. At least one comment about the topic
 - C. Support from the text
- IV. Paragraph 2
 - A. Topic (make sure it points back to the thesis statement)
 - B. At least one comment explaining the topic
 - C. Support from the text
- V. Paragraph 3
 - A. Topic (make sure it points back to the thesis statement)
 - B. At least one comment explaining the topic
 - C. Support from the text
- VI. Paragraph 4
 - A. Topic (make sure it points back to the thesis statement)
 - B. At least one comment explaining the topic
 - C. Support from the text
- VII. Paragraph 5
 - A. Topic (make sure it points back to the thesis statement)
 - B. At least one comment explaining the topic
 - C. Support from the text
- VIII. Conclusion (make sure it points back to the thesis statement)

BRITISH LITERATURE

Literary Analysis Essay

FINAL DRAFT CHECKLIST

- Do I have a strong title that hints at my thesis statement?
- Does my thesis statement align with the instructions in the Thesis Statement Guidelines provided in the April 11-15 lesson on Edvance?
- Does my opening paragraph identify the book title and author? Does it end with my thesis statement? Is the title of the book italicized?
- Does my introductory paragraph have a hook to entice the reader to read more? Does the paragraph as a whole point back to the thesis statement somehow?
- Have I followed the essay outline and included at least 3 body paragraphs?
- Does each body paragraph address only one main topic?
- Are there at least one reference or direct quote supporting each topic? Are quotes correctly punctuated? Are references correctly cited?
- Are all quotes introduced and explained in my own words?
- Have I used transitions to lead smoothly from one body paragraph to another?
- Have I used specific language and avoided repetition?
- Do my sentences flow? Are they coherent and consistent?
- Is my capitalization correct? Have I capitalized the first word of every sentence, every instance of "I," and every name?
- Have I avoided referring to myself? Have I talked about the story in the third person and using the present tense?
- Have I separated my paper into paragraphs?
- Have I re-read the paper to catch spelling errors that spellcheck would not catch?
- Does my paper conform to MLA format?
- Is my opening paragraphs at least two sentences long? Are my remaining paragraphs at least 3 sentences long?
- Does my conclusion summarize the details of the body paragraphs and reinforce the thesis?
- Have I been convincing? Have I proven my thesis?