

HOW TO WRITE A LITERARY ANALYSIS ESSAY

The purpose of a literary analysis essay is to carefully examine and sometimes evaluate a work of literature or an aspect of a work of literature. As with any analysis, this requires you to break the subject down into its component parts. Examining the different elements of a piece of literature is not an end in itself but rather a process to help you better appreciate and understand the work of literature as a whole. For instance, an analysis of a poem might deal with the different types of images in a poem or with the relationship between the form and content of the work. If you were to analyze (discuss and explain) a play, you might analyze the relationship between a subplot and the main plot, or you might analyze the character flaw of the tragic hero by tracing how it is revealed through the acts of the play. Analyzing a short story might include identifying a particular theme (like the difficulty of making the transition from adolescence to adulthood) and showing how the writer suggests that theme through the point of view from which the story is told; or you might also explain how the main character's attitude toward women is revealed through his dialogue and/or actions.

REMEMBER: 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 objective in writing a literary analysis essay is to convince the person reading your essay that you have supported the idea you are developing. ***Unlike ordinary conversation and classroom discussion, writing must stick with great determination to the specific point of development.*** This kind of writing demands tight organization and control. Therefore, your essay must have a ***central idea (thesis)***, it must have ***several paragraphs*** that grow systematically out of the central idea, and ***everything in it must be directly related to the central idea and must contribute to the reader's understanding of that central idea.*** These three principles are listed again below:

1. ***Your essay must cover the topic you are writing about.***
2. ***Your essay must have a central idea (stated in your thesis) that governs its development.***
3. ***Your essay must be organized so that every part contributes something to the reader's understanding of the central idea.***

THE ELEMENTS OF A SOLID ESSAY

The Thesis Statement

The thesis statement tells your reader what to expect: it is a restricted, 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.*** The following are thesis statements which would work for a 500-750 word literary analysis essay:

Gwendolyn Brooks's 1960 poem "The Ballad of Rudolph Reed" demonstrates how the poet uses the conventional poetic form of the ballad to treat the unconventional poetic subject of racial intolerance.

The fate of the main characters in *Antigone* illustrates the danger of excessive pride.

The imagery in Dylan Thomas's poem "Fern Hill" reveals the ambiguity of humans' relationship with nature.

Typically, the thesis statement falls at the end of your introductory paragraph.

The Introduction

The introduction to your literary analysis essay should try to capture your reader's interest. To bring immediate focus to your subject, you may want to use a quotation, a provocative question, a brief anecdote, a startling statement, or a combination of these. You may also want to include background information relevant to your thesis and necessary for the reader to understand the position you are taking. ***In addition, you need to include the title of the work of literature and name of the author.*** The following are satisfactory introductory paragraphs which include appropriate thesis statements:

- A. What would one expect to be the personality of a man who has his wife sent away to a convent (or perhaps has had her murdered) because she took too much pleasure in the sunset and in a compliment paid to her by another man? It is just such a man—a Renaissance duke—who Robert Browning portrays in his poem “My Last Duchess.” A character analysis of the Duke reveals that through his internal dialogue, his interpretation of earlier incidents, and his actions, his traits—arrogance, jealousy, and greediness—emerge.
- B. The first paragraph of Alberto Alvaro Rios’s short story “The Secret Lion” presents a twelve-year-old boy’s view of growing up—everything changes. As the narrator informs the reader, when the magician pulls a tablecloth out from under a pile of dishes, children are amazed at the “stay-the-same part,” while adults focus only on the tablecloth itself (42). Adults have the benefit of experience and know the trick will work as long as the technique is correct. When people “grow up,” they gain this experience and knowledge but lose their innocence and sense of wonder. In other words, the price paid for growing up is a permanent sense of loss. This tradeoff is central to “The Secret Lion.” The key symbols in the story reinforce its main theme: change is inevitable and always accompanied by a sense of loss.
- C. The setting of John Updike’s story “A & P” is crucial to the reader’s understanding of Sammy’s decision to quit his job. Even though Sammy knows that his quitting will make life more difficult for him, he instinctively insists upon rejecting what the A & P represents in the story. When he rings up a “No Sale” and “saunter[s]” out of the store, Sammy leaves behind not only a job but the rigid state of mind associated with the A & P. Although Sammy is the central character in the story, Updike seems to invest as much effort in describing the setting as he does Sammy. The title, after all, is not “Youthful Rebellion” or “Sammy Quits” but “A & P.” The setting is the antagonist of the story and plays a role that is as important as Sammy’s.

The Body of the Essay and the Importance of Topic Sentences

The term regularly used for the development of the central idea of a literary analysis essay is the **body**. In this section you present the paragraphs (**at least 3 paragraphs for a 500-750 word essay**) that support your thesis statement. 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**.

Each paragraph should contain a **topic sentence** (usually the first sentence of the paragraph) 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. The following is the first developmental paragraph after one of the introductory paragraphs (C) above:

TOPIC SENTENCE

EXPLANATIONS AND TEXTUAL EVIDENCE

Sammy's descriptions of the A & P present a setting that is ugly, monotonous, and rigidly regulated. The chain store is a common fixture in modern society, so the reader can identify with the uniformity Sammy describes. The fluorescent light is as blandly cool as the "checkerboard green-and-cream rubber tile floor" (486). The "usual traffic in the store moves in one direction (except for the swim suited girls, who move against it), and everything is neatly organized and categorized in tidy aisles. The dehumanizing routine of this environment is suggested by Sammy's offhand references to the typical shoppers as "sheep," "house slaves," and "pigs" (486). These regular customers seem to walk through the store in a stupor; as Sammy indicates, not even dynamite could move them out of their routine (485).

This paragraph is a strong one because it is developed through the use of quotations, summary, details, and explanation to support the topic sentence. **Notice how it relates 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.** Below is the concluding paragraph from the essay already quoted above (A) about Browning's poem "My Last Duchess":

If the Duke has any redeeming qualities, they fail to appear in the poem. Browning's emphasis on the Duke's traits of arrogance, jealousy, and materialism make it apparent that anyone who might have known the Duke personally would have based his opinion of him on these three personality "flaws." Ultimately, the reader's opinion of the Duke is not a favorable one, and it is clear that Browning intended that the reader feel this way.

The Title of Your Essay

It is essential that you give your essay a title that is descriptive of the approach you are taking in your paper. Just as you did in your introductory paragraph, try to get the reader's attention. **Using only the title of the literary work you are examining is unsatisfactory.** The titles that follow are appropriate for the papers (A, B, C) discussed above:

Robert Browning's Duke: A Portrayal of a Sinister Man
The A & P as a State of Mind
Theme in "The Secret Lion": The Struggle of Adolescence

Audience

Consider the reader for whom you are writing your essay. Imagine you are writing for not only your professor but also the other students in your class who have about as much education as you do. They have read the assigned work just as you have, but perhaps they have not thought about it in exactly the same way. In other words, **it is not necessary to "retell" the work of literature in any way.** Rather, 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)**. When you make references to the text of the short story, poem, or play, 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.**