

How to write a Literary Analysis

A good analysis shows not only a student's skill in composition, but also his/her depth of explaining and understanding of the impact of literature.

ANALYSIS – Literary Analysis

An analysis is a specific form of essay writing in which a piece of literature is explained, unfolding the theme for the reader. Here are some quick hints to writing your literary analysis.

- Focus strictly on the text of the passage.
- Information that has not been placed in the passage by the author should not be included in this type of analysis.
- Background information about the author or the work itself, while often interesting and enlightening, should not be a part of an analysis.
- Examine the literary devices the author uses to communicate the theme.

Therefore, the heart of the essay should be a discussion of the literary devices used by the author to express that theme. This should be done by a close examination of specific examples from the text.

ASSIGNMENT 1:

PART 1 – Take our first required novel *Slumdog Millionaire* and summarize it in less than four sentences. Assume that your readers have read the story once, but they don't have anywhere near the comprehension of the story that you do.

PART 2 - After reading and discussing your story with a partner, friend or parent, complete the following sentences in as few words as possible:

This story is really about. . .

Do not summarize the story! Do not discuss the plot at all. Instead, answer these questions:

What is the author trying to communicate? What's the author's point?

An important part of studying literature is analysis of text. Examining an author's techniques—diction, syntax, tone, symbolism, imagery, and other useful devices—in communicating the all-important theme can give a reader deep appreciation for both the writer's skill and the impact of the work of literature.

THEME – Literary Analysis

An analysis is a specific form of essay writing in which a piece of literature is explained.

The best way to begin an analysis is to focus on the theme expressed in the passage: What does the author want the reader to understand? Once you identify the message of the text, then you may begin to explicate *how* the author communicates that theme.

Theme - What exactly is this elusive thing called theme? The theme of a fable is its moral. The theme of a parable is its teaching. The theme of a piece of fiction is its view about life and how people behave. In fiction, the theme is not intended to teach or preach. In fact, it is not presented directly at all. You extract it from the characters, action, and setting that make up the story. In other words, you must figure out the theme yourself. The writer's task is to communicate on a common ground with the reader. Although the particulars of your experience may be different from the details of the story, the general underlying truths behind the story may be just the connection that both you and the writer are seeking.

ASSIGNMENT 2:

PART 1 - Finding the Theme - Answer the following questions.

Finding the Theme - Here are some ways to uncover the theme in a story: Check out the title. Sometimes it tells you a lot about the theme. Notice repeating patterns and symbols. Sometimes these lead you to the theme. What allusions are made throughout the story? What are the details and particulars in the story? What greater meaning may they have? Remember that theme, plot, and structure are inseparable, all helping to inform and reflect back on each other. Also, be aware that a theme we determine from a story never

completely explains the story. It is simply one of the elements that make up the whole. The play version of Susan Glaspell's "A Jury of Her Peers" is called Trifles. What do both titles suggest about the theme?

Read the sample essay "Deep Desires that Transcend Time" - What is the theme this author is analyzing? List two examples of support used in this essay.

PART 2 - Revisit the sentence you wrote for Assignment 1. Is it still accurate? Have you learned anything that might cause you to change your definition of the theme of *Slumdog Millionaire*? Rewrite your statement of theme if necessary.

PART 3 - Identify two crucial passages in *Slumdog Millionaire* that develop the theme you've identified. This is how you know if you've found the right passages: Without those two passages, the story would have a completely different meaning. The two passages you identify should be so important that the story would be nothing without them. This is hard, so think for a while.

Adapt the format and structure your argument to fit what you need to say about the text.

ANALYSIS FORMULA – Literary Analysis

Remember that summary alone is worthless.

Maybe it's easier to think of an analysis as a formulaic, five-paragraph essay. Obviously, the goal is an in-depth, sophisticated explication of literary text. However, everyone has to begin somewhere and it's usually easier to start on the simplified level. Here's the basic outline:

- Paragraph 1: Introduction - Introduction Methods: An anecdote, startling fact or opinion, quotation, background information, simple statement of thesis. Get the reader's attention. Set the tone of the essay. State the controlling idea (thesis) of the essay.
- Paragraph 2: Analysis of 1st literary device - Clearly identify the topic of the paragraph—not just the device but how it relates to the theme. Give specific examples from the text which show how the device is used, explain how those examples fit the definition of that device, and show how those examples help to communicate the theme of the passage. A good concluding (clincher) sentence may help to pull together your ideas and make a transition to the next paragraph.
- Paragraph 3: Analysis of 2nd literary device - Clearly identify the topic of the paragraph—not just the device but how it relates to the theme. Give specific examples from the text which show how the device is used, explain how those examples fit the definition of that device, and show how those examples help to communicate the theme of the passage. A good concluding (clincher) sentence may help to pull together your ideas and make a transition to the next paragraph.
- Paragraph 4: Analysis of 3rd literary device - Clearly identify the topic of the paragraph—not just the device but how it relates to the theme. Give specific examples from the text which show how the device is used, explain how those examples fit the definition of that device, and show how those examples help to communicate the theme of the passage. A good concluding (clincher) sentence may help to pull together your ideas and make a transition to the next paragraph.
- Paragraph 5: Conclusion - This should tie together the main ideas of the essay. It should not simply summarize or repeat the ideas, but should extend them by establishing a relationship between the passage and why we should understand it. It's often helpful to think of this as the answer to the "so what" question—why is this passage important to us?

Literary Devices

Allegory - a symbolic representation i.e. *The blindfolded figure with scales is an allegory of justice.*

Alliteration - the repetition of the initial consonant. There should be at least two repetitions in a row. i.e. *Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers.*

Allusion - A reference to a famous person or event in life or literature. i.e. *She is as pretty as the Mona Lisa.*

Analogy - the comparison of two pairs which have the same relationship. i.e. *shoe is to foot as tire is to wheel*

Assonance - the repetition of similar vowel sounds in a sentence.

Climax - the turning point of the action in the plot of a play or story. The climax represents the point of greatest tension in the work.

Foreshadowing - hints of what is to come in the action of a play or a story

Hyperbole - a figure of speech involving exaggeration.

Metaphor - A comparison in which one thing is said to be another. i.e. *The cat's eyes were jewels, gleaming in the darkness.*

Onomatopoeia - the use of words to imitate the sounds they describe. i.e. *The burning wood crackled and hissed.*

Oxymoron - putting two contradictory words together. i.e. *bittersweet, jumbo shrimp, and act naturally*

Personification - is giving human qualities to animals or objects. i.e. *The daffodils nodded their yellow heads.*

Pun - A word is used which has two meanings at the same time, which results in humor.

Simile - figure of speech involving a comparison between unlike things using like, as, or as though. i.e. *She floated in like a cloud.*

Do you have to discuss precisely three literary devices? Of course not. There may be only two devices used extensively enough in the passage for you to evaluate. Or perhaps there are four important devices which you need to analyze. The difference between following a strict five-paragraph formula and adapting that structure to fit the passage you are analyzing again becomes a question of sophistication: how do you need to structure your argument to fit what you need to say about the text? There is no magic number of paragraphs or examples, just as there is no magic number of words you must write in order to have an excellent essay. The length of your paper—the number of paragraphs, the number of examples, and the number of words—is determined by what you have to say and how you say it. You should always organize your ideas so that they are clear to the reader and they all add up in the end to prove your argument. (It's something like doing a Geometry proof. How many steps do you need to prove the theorem and in what order do they need to be addressed to solve the problem?)

ASSIGNMENT 3:

A step-by-step guide: Complete all 5 steps. You should be just about ready to write your first draft!

- 1) Read the story carefully. You should be able to recreate the narrative line, identify the essential conflict, and distinguish between major elements of plot which influence the movement of the story.
- 2) Select a literary device in the story to explore (point of view, time, foreshadowing, imagery, tone, symbolism, syntax, etc.), something that has an impact on the theme of the work. You may want to examine the story from a particular critical perspective or approach.
- 3) Read the story again, *identifying and marking passages* that relate to that element.
- 4) Write a "working thesis," making a claim about the element you have chosen to analyze. Remember, you are making a statement about the author's use of the literary device in relation to the theme of the work. The purpose of your essay will be to support, explore, demonstrate, and/or illustrate the validity of the claim you have made about that element.
- 5) Select specific passages that offer the reader evidence of your claim. Avoid quoting passages longer than a single paragraph. Instead, try to incorporate the most important phrases or brief sets of sentences into each paragraph.

THESIS – Literary Analysis

The theme will be the focus of the analysis. Like the essay itself, the thesis can be either simplistic or sophisticated. It is important to remember that the thesis statement controls the entire composition. If an idea is not stated in the thesis—either directly or indirectly—then it does not belong in that essay. A focused and concise thesis statement will give you a greater chance of producing writing that clearly communicates your argument.

A formula for the most basic analysis thesis could look something like this:

In (title of poem/novel/play), (author's name) uses (1st literary device), (2nd literary device), and (3rd literary device) to (show/criticize/explain/etc.) (some aspect of human nature).

Notice that the second part of such a thesis (beginning with "to") identifies the theme of the passage, which will be the focus of the analysis.

An example of this type of simple thesis is:

In "If you Were Coming in the Fall," Emily Dickinson uses simile, diction, and syntax to describe how people wait, hoping to fall in love.

If all you do in one body paragraph is give a few examples of irony from the text and simply identify them as irony, then you haven't *analyzed* anything. The analysis part involves explaining *how* those examples are irony and *how* they help to communicate the theme of the passage. But to be sophisticated in your analysis, you must have ideas that are "in-depth" - not just the superficial facts of what you see on the page. You must *interpret* what the author has given you to work with and show that you understand the theme.

This is where your composition and analytical skills intertwine: the words you use to express your ideas and how you structure your sentences go a long way toward achieving that goal of "sophistication." A well-crafted composition will make the reader understand clearly the relationships between the ideas; it will give the reader food for thought without making the task of understanding your ideas so difficult that reading your essay becomes a challenge.

ASSIGNMENT 4:

Complete all steps. Work your essay to perfection! Literary Analysis: Step-by-step

- 1) Compose topic sentences (four or five, perhaps) that support, explore, demonstrate, explain, or illustrate your thesis. Always begin with the topic sentence (a claim); never begin a paragraph in the body of your paper with a quotation or summary sentence.
- 2) Again, select specific passages that offer the reader evidence of your claim. Be sure to incorporate only the most important phrases or brief sets of sentences into each paragraph. You should be able to complete this task more readily than last asked.
- 3) Build your paper to a climax; save your most engaging or important topic sentence for discussion last.
- 4) Begin your paper with an introduction that identifies the purpose of the paper and the text you are addressing. Open the paragraph with an interest device like a quotation, startling statement, or rhetorical question that will engage the reader's reflection and interest. The title (which you may want to develop at the end of the writing process) should be provocative without being juvenile, should reflect the perspective of the paper and perhaps your point of view or attitude toward the topic.
- 5) Conclude your paper with a paragraph that does more than summarize your thesis and major points. You may wish to echo your opening interest device, evaluate the author's development of the motif, or identify points for further reflection.
- 6) Print out your paper for careful editing. Reread it for smooth transition in and out of quotations and check for adequate support of each claim or topic sentence.

WARNINGS – Literary Analysis

A good analysis shows not only a student's skill in composition, but also his/her depth of analysis and understanding of the impact of literature.

You must interpret what the author has given you to work with. Here you must be aware of a huge pitfall: there is a fine line between interpreting what is in a text and reading into it so that you are adding meaning that the author did not include. You must continually ask yourself "Is

this actually what the text says?” as you explain your ideas. If you stay focused on the text you are analyzing and keep challenging yourself to think deeply about what is on the page, you will generally produce an acceptable (hopefully insightful) analysis. Certainly we teachers like to read essays that have all the words spelled correctly, all the punctuation in the proper places, and all the sentences put together so they are grammatically correct. But what we truly enjoy is to see that our students understand the literature we ask you to read. The best moments are when the analyses we are reading give *us* new insights into a text, for that is when the students show understanding of the impact of literature.

Retrieved and adapted from: <http://scweb.esuhd.org/programs/english/analysis/analysis.html>, originally developed by Becci McDaniel

Deep Desires that Transcend Time

© Alyssa Ensminger, 1998

Winning Essay for Literary Analysis, Beulah Davis Outstanding Freshman Writer Award

William Butler Yeats wrote two poems which are together known as the Byzantium series. The first is “Sailing to Byzantium,” and its sequel is simply named “Byzantium.” The former is considered the easier of the two to understand. It contains multiple meanings and emotions, and the poet uses various literary devices to communicate them. Two of the most dominant themes of this poem are the desire for escape from the hardships of this world and the quest for immortality. These are circumstances of the poet's life that influenced the composition of the poem. Those personal experiences and Yeats's skillful use of words come together to emphasize the need, or at least desire, that many people have for escape and immortality.

The first stanza of “Sailing to Byzantium” describes a society of people who live for the moment but ignore the wisdom and intellect that the poet finds important. In his frustration, the poet says in lines 21-22 that his heart is “sick with desire / And fastened to a dying animal.” He is ready to leave this world of apathy and arrive in his holy land of Byzantium, which is a sort of paradise in his mind (Kennedy and Gioia 866-67). This is evidence of his desire for escape. In the second stanza, Yeats describes an aged man as “a paltry thing, / A tattered coat upon a stick” (9-10). It is believed that the poet is describing his own condition in these lines. The physical weariness he is experiencing causes him to want to be able to sing through poetry to keep his spirit alive. He believes that his poetry can help him to transcend time and old age, and that it will take him to his ideal city of Byzantium (Thorndike 1852). He prays that the sages of God will “be the singing-masters of my soul” (20). In other words, he wants to be taught how to write the poetry that will sustain his spirit. This is the poet's attempt at achieving immortality. As long as his poetry still exists and is read, a part of his soul continues to live.

These two major themes in the poem are enhanced by the writer's use of symbolism. Byzantium, as mentioned before, is a sort of ideal land, comparable to the scriptural heaven. This is obviously one of the most predominant symbols in the poem. Another symbol that carries throughout the work is that of a bird. There is a reference to a bird in each stanza, but perhaps the best indicator of its meaning is found in stanza 4. Yeats uses the image of a bird “set upon a golden bough to sing” (30) to refer to the timelessness and spirit he craves. The bird that is set in gold is there forever, singing for all time, and the poet longs to be able to sing similarly through his poetry and therefore achieve immortality. Finally, the metaphor of singing is present in each stanza and reinforces the poet's desire to be able to create timeless music in poetry. He says that reading poems is a kind of “singing school” (13) where he can learn to step into that world of immortality (Thorndike 1853).

Similar to the way Yeats uses symbols to enhance this poem, he uses personal experience to inspire it. Twenty years prior to writing “Sailing to Byzantium,” he was first exposed to Byzantine art. He saw mosaics that are regarded as the basis for most of the imagery in stanza 3. Also, when Yeats was nearly sixty years old, he suffered high blood pressure and had difficulty breathing. His wife took him on a Mediterranean tour to help him relax, and on that tour he saw mosaics that contrasted art with nature. This would explain his statement in the poem that “Once out of nature I shall never take / My bodily form from any natural thing, / But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make” (25-27). In addition, Yeats did not regret leaving his home on this excursion because he was depressed about his

health and dissatisfied with the political situations at home. Therefore, it is probably that the imaginative voyage the man takes in the poem from one place to a more appealing one is directly influenced by the poet's feelings at that time (Allen 3728).

“Sailing to Byzantium” is a poem packed with emotion and meaning. It depicts a man striving to reach a better place while leaving a piece of his soul behind for all time. It expresses the weariness and frustration that everyone experiences at some point, but especially with the aging process. It is a poem that encompasses human desires and emotions and presents them almost as though they were in a dream. However, it is almost as though the imaginative wording of the poem makes it easier to see the reality behind its message. The poem refreshes the craving people have for a better world with no hardships, and the need they have to leave a part of themselves here to sing eternally “Of what is past, or passing, or to come” (32).

Works Cited

Allen, James Lovic. “William Butler Yeats.” *Critical Survey of Poetry: English Language Series*. Revised ed. Vol. 8. Ed. Frank N. Magill. Englewood Cliffs: 1992. 3709-3729.
 Kennedy, S. J., and Dana Gioia, eds. *Literature: An Introduction to Fiction, Poetry, and Drama*. 6th ed. New York: Harper Collins, 1995. 866-868.
 Thorndike, Jonathan L. “Sailing to Byzantium.” *Masterplots II: Poetry Series*. Vol. 5. Ed. Frank N. Magil. Englewood Cliffs: 1992. 1852-1854. © Alyssa Ensminger, 1998

Grade 11/12—Literary Analysis Rubric

Score	Content	Organization	Style	Conventions
4	Above and beyond	Above and beyond	Above and beyond	Above and beyond
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Analyzes author’s use of literary elements and techniques Offers clear and explicit interpretations by incorporating and explaining specific textual evidence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establishes a clearly stated thesis and maintains a consistent focus Evidence is logically sequenced and supports the thesis Relationships among ideas are clearly connected using transitions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Writes in third person Establishes and maintains a consistent voice and style appropriate to an academic audience 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Demonstrates control over grade appropriate conventions, exhibiting only occasional errors and using sophisticated language (see curriculum framework, page 14)
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recognizes author’s use of literary elements and techniques Support from text is used, but it is only referenced rather than interpreted 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Thesis is stated, but is not maintained in the body of the paper Evidence is apparent, but sequence does not enhance the argument Relationship among ideas is not always evident due to sporadic use of transitions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Writer varies perspective using third, second and first person Establishes voice and style that is not consistently appropriate to an academic audience 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Demonstrates control of appropriate conventions exhibiting multiple errors in conventions and language
1	Unsatisfactory	Unsatisfactory	Unsatisfactory	Unsatisfactory

Adapted for Adams Twelve Five Star Schools, original rubric by Marzano Research Laboratory, Robert J. Marzano, May, 2009.

Summary of the assignments:

ASSIGNMENT 1:

PART 1 – Take our first required novel *Slumdog Millionaire* and summarize it in less than four sentences. Assume that your readers have read the story once, but they don’t have anywhere near the comprehension of the story that you do.

PART 2 - After reading and discussing your story with a partner, friend or parent, complete the following sentences in as few words as possible:

This story is really about. . .

Do not summarize the story! Do not discuss the plot at all. Instead, answer these questions:

What is the author trying to communicate? What's the author's point?

ASSIGNMENT 2:

PART 1 - Finding the Theme - Answer the following questions.

Read the sample essay "Deep Desires that Transcend Time" - What is the theme this author is analyzing? List two examples of support used in this essay.

PART 2 - Revisit the sentence you wrote for Assignment 1. Is it still accurate? Have you learned anything that might cause you to change your definition of the theme of *Slumdog Millionaire*? Rewrite your statement of theme if necessary.

PART 3 - Identify two crucial passages in *Slumdog Millionaire* that develop the theme you've identified. This is how you know if you've found the right passages: Without those two passages, the story would have a completely different meaning. The two passages you identify should be so important that the story would be nothing without them. This is hard, so think for a while.

ASSIGNMENT 3:

A step-by-step guide: Complete all 5 steps. You should be just about ready to write your first draft!

1. Read the story carefully. You should be able to recreate the narrative line, identify the essential conflict, and distinguish between major elements of plot which influence the movement of the story.
2. Select a literary device in the story to explore (point of view, time, foreshadowing, imagery, tone, symbolism, syntax, etc.), something that has an impact on the theme of the work. You may want to examine the story from a particular critical perspective or approach.
3. Read the story again, *identifying and marking passages* that relate to that element.
4. Write a "working thesis," making a claim about the element you have chosen to analyze. Remember, you are making a statement about the author's use of the literary device in relation to the theme of the work. The purpose of your essay will be to support, explore, demonstrate, and/or illustrate the validity of the claim you have made about that element.
5. Select specific passages that offer the reader evidence of your claim. Avoid quoting passages longer than a single paragraph. Instead, try to incorporate the most important phrases or brief sets of sentences into each paragraph.

ASSIGNMENT 4:

Complete all steps. Work your essay to perfection! Literary Analysis: Step-by-step

1. Compose topic sentences (four or five, perhaps) that support, explore, demonstrate, explain, or illustrate your thesis. Always begin with the topic sentence (a claim); never begin a paragraph in the body of your paper with a quotation or summary sentence.
2. Again, select specific passages that offer the reader evidence of your claim. Be sure to incorporate only the most important phrases or brief sets of sentences into each paragraph. You should be able to complete this task more readily than last asked.
3. Build your paper to a climax; save your most engaging or important topic sentence for discussion last.
4. Begin your paper with an introduction that identifies the purpose of the paper and the text you are addressing. Open the paragraph with an interest device like a quotation, startling statement, or rhetorical question that will engage the reader's reflection and interest. The title (which you may want to develop at the end of the writing process) should be provocative without being juvenile, should reflect the perspective of the paper and perhaps your point of view or attitude toward the topic.
5. Conclude your paper with a paragraph that does more than summarize your thesis and major points. You may wish to echo your opening interest device, evaluate the author's development of the motif, or identify points for further reflection.
6. Print out your paper for careful editing. Reread it for smooth transition in and out of quotations and check for adequate support of each claim or topic sentence.

All assignments must be typed, 12 font, Times New Roman, 1" margins, double spaced, and in black ink, four assignments, means four pages, with the last assignment on top, stapled.