Literary Analysis

What is a literary analysis?

A writer analyzes a subject by breaking the subject down into parts, discussing how those parts work together, and usually evaluating whether they work together in a good or bad way. If you ever discussed the brilliance of a well-executed football play or explained to a friend why your favorite movie is so good, then you have analyzed before. A literary analysis is simply a writing assignment in which you do the same thing but with a piece of literature. It may also involve research and analysis of secondary sources.

As stated above, any analysis requires you to break the subject down into its component parts. Here are some elements commonly included in a literary analysis:

The Basics:

- Plot
- Setting
- Narration/point of view
- Characterization
- Symbol/Imagery
- Metaphor
- Genre
- Irony/ambiguity

Other key concepts:

- Historical context
- Social context
- Political context
- Economic context
- Literary theory
- Various critical orientations
- Ideology

A literary analysis, however, does not just list off the various elements of a work of literature. Instead, the author shows how these parts work together to demonstrate some significant idea or experience. Your professor may identify a theme that he or she wants you to write on. At other times, you may need to choose your own. Here are some examples of such larger themes often considered in a literary analysis.

Themes:

- Justice
- Love
- Race
- Gender
- Religion/God
- Family
What makes a good literary analysis?

- **Introduction:** In the first sentence of the introduction, give the full title of the work, the genre, and the complete name of the author while identifying the larger theme that you will discuss in your essay (e.g., In the short story “A Rose for Emily,” William Faulkner explores the relationship between love and death.). After your first introductory sentence, provide a one to two sentence summary of the story or play or provide a one to two sentence statement of the dramatic situation of the poem. Your introduction will conclude with the thesis statement of your essay.

- **Thesis Statement:** A literary analysis is essentially an argument; therefore, it must have a thesis statement. This statement should not simply summarize the work of literature. Nor should the thesis simply state your opinion of the work. Instead it should focus on one or more of the elements within the text and state their significance. **Example:** The use of “whiteness” in *Moby Dick* illustrates the uncertainty about the meaning of life Ishmael expresses throughout the novel.

- **Evidence:** For your thesis to be convincing, you need to support important generalizations and observations with specific information and quotations from the poem, play, or story you are discussing. The most common problem in writing about literature is that the student forgets to support the thesis. Instead of using the materials from the poem, story, or play to show that the thesis is reasonable and valid, the student lapses into retelling the story or play, or paraphrasing the poem, as if the thesis were secondary to or self-evident from plot or paraphrase. You must select evidence that proves the truth of your thesis to the reader and not just say “what happened” or reword lines of poetry. Also, while biographical information about the author may be useful, your essay should not simply become a report on the author's life either. Nothing should appear in your essay that does not support your thesis.

**Other Helpful Hints**

- **Title:** Include your own creative title. Do not give your essay the same title as the poem, short story, or play you are discussing.

- **Author, character, and speaker:** Always distinguish between the author of a work of literature and the narrator and/or characters he or she has created. In discussing poetry, also be careful not to confuse the poet with the speaker or characters in the poem.

- **Identify characters and speakers:** Assume the reader knows the piece of literature you are writing about, but give readers context so they can understand your claims. This does not mean you recount the story in detail! Remember, you have just summarized the work in the introduction. You should, however, make sure the reader understands who or what you are talking about by making necessary identification via phrases or clauses. For example, suppose you are analyzing the character of Miss Emily Grierson in William Faulkner's “A Rose for Emily.” One of your sentences might read as follows: “When Miss Emily is jilted by Homer Barron, a Northerner and day laborer who has recently been courting her, her pride takes a severe blow.” Notice that the reader of your essay can understand who Homer Barron is, yet you keep your focus on Miss Emily’s character.
• **Tense**: Use the present tense when writing about literature. (“Miss Emily Grierson is proud”; “Faulkner implies”; “In William Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, Juliet’s father wants her to marry Paris, but she is in love with Romeo”).

• **Person**: Use third person as a rule when writing about literature. If you are writing a response paper, drawing on your personal reactions or relationship to films or works of literature, first person (I) is appropriate and necessary. Never address the reader as “you” (second person). If you must address the reader in some way, use a phrasing like “as one can see.”

• **Titles of works**: Novels are underlined or italicized, while titles of poems, short stories, and essays are put in quotation marks. Use standard rules of capitalization.

• **Parenthetical citations**: For short essays on one work, page numbers in parentheses are adequate to indicate the origin of quotations. For poems, insert line numbers after quotations. For research papers, or essays that address more than one work, rules for full parenthetical citations apply.

• **Longer prose quotations**: For quotations of five lines or more, set the passage off by a ten-space indentation. For these “block quotations,” do not use quotation marks, and place the period before the parenthetical citations.

• **Poetry quotations**: When quoting poetry of three lines or fewer in your paragraph, you must indicate line breaks by the use of a slash (/) and observe all original punctuation from the poem. When quoting more than three lines, you must begin on a new line and indent ten spaces. You must preserve all original line endings, spacing, punctuation, etc.

• **“Dumping” quotations**: Do not drop or “dump” a quotation into the middle of a paragraph. When using quotations (from both primary and secondary sources), you must observe all rules of grammar, punctuation, logic, and style. Grammatical use of quotations excludes the use of fragments that are not integrated into complete sentences. The speaker and context of a quotation also must be clear as must its relation to your topic sentence. Quotations must be properly introduced and followed by your commentary.
A Guide to Literary Elements

- **SETTING**: The time a story takes place, its locale, and social situations can "prompt characters to act, bring them to realizations, or cause them to reveal their inmost natures."

- **PLOT**: Ultimately unimportant to a story, this element is the connected sequence of narrative events.

- **TONE**: Like the aura or atmosphere of a story, this element can be defined as an author's implicit attitude toward the characters, places, and events in the story.

- **ALLUSION**: A reference to some person, place or thing history, in other fiction, or in actuality, this enables writers to call up associations and contexts that complicate and enrich their works.

- **THEME**: A general statement about a work’s meaning, this element can be described as “a unifying vision,” “the principle of unity,” or “the truth or insight you think the writer…reveals.”

- **SYMBOL**: An object or event that suggests more than itself in poem or short story.

- **IMAGERY**: Through use of this element, a writer draws on the common fund of human experiences revealed through the five senses – sight, sound, taste, touch and smell.

- **CONNOTATION**: The suggestive meaning of a word that supplements its literal or denotative meaning.

- **POINT OF VIEW**: This element does not indicate the author of a story, but represents the one from whose perspective the story is told, often in first or third person, sometimes second person.

- **METAPHOR**: An example of figurative language, this element equates two dissimilar things.

- **SIMILE**: This figurative language device compares two things to each other using “like” or “as.”

- **PERSONIFICATION**: Attributes human qualities to nonhuman things.

- **CHARACTERIZATION**: The process by which the imagined people in a story are rendered to make them seem more real to the reader.

- **RHYTHM**: In a poem, this element is created by the relationship between stressed and unstressed syllables.

- **METER**: The pattern formed when the lines of a poem follow a recurrent or similar rhythm.