

# How to Write a Literary Analysis Essay

## The Elements of a Literary Analysis Essay

What is analysis?

Separation or breaking up of a whole into its fundamental elements or component parts.

What is *literary* analysis?

A detailed examination of the component parts of complex literature (a novel, poem, play or short story) made in order to understand its nature or determine its essential features.

Adapted from *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*

## What can I use as source material for a successful literary analysis?

As it says above, it will need to be complex. By complexity, we mean the following:

- it deals with "big ideas": can we fight fate? do we control our destinies? is conflict between parents and children inevitable? how do we redeem ourselves? etc.
- it uses *indirect* ways to tell us about these big ideas: characters fight fate and try to control their destinies, metaphors are used, the narrator lets the characters' actions and words tell us about the big ideas, symbolic language is used to convey the big ideas

## What are the different types of literary analysis and which one should I choose?

Type	Description	Example Assignment
Analyzing an Element of Literature	In this type of analysis, the writer chooses one or more elements of literature and focuses on how well the author used the element(s) and for what purpose. Notice the focus of the analysis is very narrow.	Discuss the author's intent in using a particular element of literature and the effect of that element: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• characterization</li><li>• imagery</li><li>• figures of speech</li><li>• symbolism</li><li>• plotting/sequencing</li><li>• point of view</li></ul>
	Works well for almost any novel, short story, play, or poem.	<b>Thesis:</b> Smith's use of symbols allows us to see Mr. X's moral degradation more clearly as the story progresses.

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- plotting/sequencing
- point of view

**Thesis:** *Smith's use of symbols allows us to see Mr. X's moral degradation more clearly as the story progresses.*

**Katniss is not a likable character due to the brutality of the setting.**

**Tris lives in a constant state of anxiety due to the rule of the society she lives in.**

**The setting of the story creates the main conflict for the characters.**

**The character's internal conflicts drive his external conflicts.**

**The protagonist is considered savage by society's standards, but her life is what defined the savagery.**

**The main character's weak nature is what causes all of her problems.**

**Because the story is written in first-person, the reader can relate the real challenges a teen faces.**

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In this type of analysis, the writer focuses on analyzing the major theme(s) of a text and how the author crafted that theme through the

Discuss the theme of the story with supporting evidence from the text.

**Thesis:** *Oedipus Rex centers on the idea that we cannot fight our fate and that doing so brings disaster.*

This type of analysis involves a close reading of the text in order to analyze the author's style.

Works well for poems and for any piece of literature that has an unusual style or structure

Discuss the author's style and its effect through an analysis of:

- \*diction (word choice)
- \*use and choice of details
- \*point of view
- \*organization (non-linear plotting)
- \*tone
- \*flashback
- \*literary elements

**Thesis:** Hemingway's use of short, almost brutal, sentences aligns with the nature of his characters and contributes to the themes of his novels.

Each chapter ends in a cliffhanger, which keeps the plot fast-paced and exciting.

## Style or Prose Analysis

The author uses very descriptive imagery to capture the setting, allowing a clear picture for the reader.

The brutal dialogue used in the fight between the protagonist and his mother creates the viscious, real picture of the conflict in his family.

By using racist language, Sherman Alexie shocks the reader and brings to light the ugliness and brutality of racism.

Tolkien's extremely long sentences are necessary to create the fantasy world of *The Hobbit*.

The matter-of-fact voice of the narrator in the short story "My Favorite Murder" creates a chilling tone.

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## Point of View in Literary Analysis

A literary analysis is a formal academic essay in which the writer presents a thesis, or opinion on a subject. In such formal academic writing, the proper point of view for the essay is **third person** (using the pronouns he, she, it, they). It's redundant to use first person (using the pronoun I) in an essay that requires a writer's opinion. The audience already knows it is your opinion!

*INCORRECT: First Person*

I think that the death of Piggy in William Golding's *Lord of Flies* symbolizes the death of civilization.

*CORRECT: Third Person*

The death of Piggy in William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* symbolizes the death of civilization.

## Evidence & Citations

### How should I weave in quotes and commentary?

#### The S-C-C-C Format

This is a very useful format for citations if you are not very familiar with citations and need to practice a tried and true method. As writers become experienced with citations, they can move away from this format and mix elements up as they see fit.

1. Set it up. Set up the context that the quote is from, so that the reader knows when and where the quote is from and who is doing the speaking/writing.
2. Citation. Write the quote out, in quotation marks.
3. Commentary: Explain how the quote supports your topic/thesis. (Commenting on the quote.)
4. Commentary: further commenting on the quote

EXAMPLE:

In an effort to make Othello jealous, Iago uses reverse psychology when he warns Othello, "O Beware, my lord, of jealousy! /It is the green-eyed monster" ( III.iii.180-181). The master of emotional manipulation, Iago controls Othello by warning him unnecessarily against jealousy, thus planting the seeds of jealousy in within Othello's heart. It also gives Iago the opportunity to tell others that he warned Othello, thus absolving Iago of any responsibility.

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#### The Embedded Citation

This is useful when you would prefer to pick out very small phrases to prove your points.

Write your own sentence beginning, include the quote, and write your own sentence ending. The quote flows into and out of the sentence.

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## Some specifics about citing

### Citing Lines of Poetry

1. Cite verse (plays and poems) by divisions (act, scene, canto, book, part) and lines, using Arabic numerals for the various divisions.
2. Use periods to separate the various parts.
3. If you care citing lines only, use the word "line" or "lines" in your first reference and numbers only in parenthesis in the additional references.

When she learns that Romeo is a Montague, Juliet exclaims, " My only love, sprung from my only hate!/Too early seen unknown, and known too late" (1.5.138-139).

Note: A diagonal "/" is used to show where each new line of verse begins."

### Citing Verse Quotations

Verse quotations of more than three lines should be indented 10 spaces and single-spaced, after double spacing away from the main body of the text. Each line of the poem or play begins a new line of the quotation. Do NOT run the lines together or separate them with diagonals. Diagonals are used to separate lines only when you are quoting within the main text of your paper. Put the line numbers in parenthesis after the punctuation mark in this case. Skip two spaces before you begin the citation.

### Example:

Elizabeth Bishop's poem "*The Fish*" contains layer upon layer of specific concrete details:

He was speckled with barnacles,  
Five rosettes of lines  
And infested  
With tiny white sea lice,  
And underneath two or three  
Rags of green weed hung down. (16-21)

### Citing Novels or Books

Citing from one text:

1. To cite other texts like stories and novels, list the page number in parenthesis after the work.
2. Include the author's name only the first time you reference the work.
3. After that, use simple page numbers (16-17).

**Example:**

In *Cry, The Beloved Country*, Alan Paton presents Steven Kumalo as "a man who lives in a world not made for him, whose own world is slipping away, dying, being destroyed, beyond recall" (14).

## How to Write Commentary

Of all the skills students must learn in style analysis, writing commentary is considered the most difficult. Writing commentary means giving your own opinion and interpretation about something, which requires a higher level of thinking than most students are used to demonstrating. Using commentary makes an essay interesting to read and shows that you can analyze and evaluate information.

When you write commentary, you are commenting on a point you have made.

Synonyms for commentary:

- analysis
- interpretation
- insight
- evaluation
- explication
- discussion
- speculation

**There are two methods for developing commentary in a body paragraph:**

Method One: \*stronger method

The *SCCC* format - for direct quotes

1. Set-up the context of the quote
2. Quote
3. Commentary on quote
4. Commentary on quote

Method Two:

Concrete Detail Format - for concrete details

1. Topic Sentence
2. Concrete Detail Sentence
3. Commentary about the concrete detail
4. Commentary about the concrete detail

## The Basic Outline for a Literary Analysis

### Introduction

1. Hook (Catching the reader's attention)
2. Context of the work (includes author, text title and any background info needed to understand the thesis)
3. Thesis Statement

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Body Paragraphs and their topics should be ordered in the same order that the topics were introduced in the introduction.

### Body

- A. Major Point #1
  1. supporting evidence/commentary
  2. supporting evidence/commentary
  3. supporting evidence/commentary
- B. Major Point #2
  1. supporting evidence/commentary
  2. supporting evidence/commentary
  3. supporting evidence/commentary
- C. Major Point #3
  1. supporting evidence/commentary
  2. supporting evidence/commentary
  3. supporting evidence/commentary

***A minimum of two pieces of evidence per major point is required for proficiency. More is better!!!***

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### Conclusion

- Restate or reemphasize the thesis.
- Evaluate what the ideas contribute to the text, to any discussion of the big ideas it discussed, or to readers in general
- End with a final observation that leaves the reader thinking.

Source: Jane Schaeffer Publications, Style Analysis (1998)