Goals for this Study Sheet

This study sheet will detail what a literary analysis is and will provide some basic steps to follow in writing one. Analysis assignments tend to be the ones that students struggle with the most, so hopefully this study sheet will demystify literary analysis papers and help you write one with confidence.

What Is a Literary Analysis?

The basic premise behind any analysis assignment is to find meaning in the thing you are analyzing. That is the most important thing to remember: you are looking for meaning. Specifically with literary analysis, you are looking for meaning in a piece of literature: specifically a novel, short story, poem, or play.

How to Write a Literary Analysis

An easy way to think of a literary analysis is like an argument essay. Your goal for the assignment is to find the meaning you would like to discuss, and argue that your interpretation is substantiated by using evidence from the text.

Follow these steps to begin the process of finding your stance and building your essay:

1. Read the Text...Live the Text...Become the Text

It is crucial to become very familiar with the text that you are analyzing. The only way you will be able to develop an interpretation of the text to argue for is if you know the text inside out, understand how the components work together, etc.

2. Research the Context of Your Text

This step can be tricky. Positive results of this step are manyfold. Understanding the time period your piece was written in, the author and their personal life, and other

From the Writing Center at the Academic Resource Center

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things like that can help you very much in understanding the work and how you should go about analysing it.

However, there are several traps you can fall into when researching context. One of the main ones is called the Biographical Fallacy. You are committing the biographical fallacy when you try to interpret the text as a reflection of the author’s life. This can be tempting. For example, in her novel Jane Eyre, Charlotte Brontë has young Jane spend the majority of her youth in a strict boarding school, where she witnesses the deaths of many of her classmates due to illness. This is almost exactly what happened to Brontë as a young child. However, you cannot assume that because the same thing happened to Brontë that she wrote about it to reflect her personal life. To assume this is a big jump in logic, as a writer can manipulate their characters/story in whatever way they like. While they might include an event that happened to them personally, they could (and probably did) change the events in some key ways to make them different from their own personal experiences.

3. Look for Things that Interest You

In general, it is easier to write about things that interest you. While you are digesting your text, be on the look-out for things that capture your attention, and then think about why that is the case. For example, say you are reading To Kill A Mockingbird and you see feminist themes appear in relation to Scout’s character. If you’re passionate about feminism, then writing about Scout and her character through a feminist lense of criticism will be far more enjoyable than just picking a topic you don’t care much about. This is not to say that you should only write about topics that you know a lot about; try new things, and learn about concepts that you are less familiar with. However, you will have much more fun writing your paper if you are interested in what you are writing about.

4. Look for Uses of Literary Devices and/or other Elements

While you are reading your novel, take note of the different literary devices and/or elements the author is using in their story. (There’s a link under Links to Additional
Resources that go to an outside source that lists most of the usual devices and elements.) These devices include things such as characterization, plot development, symbolism, setting, etc. Literary devices are the tools an author uses to build their story, and the meaning or effect they are trying to convey. When you come up with your argument as to what the author is trying to do with the text, you need to use literary devices/elements to back up your stance.

5. Decide What Your Stance Is Going to Be

After examining the literary devices and elements the author uses, you need to determine what your stance is going to be. The stance you take in a literary analysis is one that makes a claim about what the author is trying to accomplish with the text, or how the text is relevant in some way. There are no right or wrong stances to take on texts, you simply have to be able to back yours up with sufficient evidence. You can take countless angles on a story, you just need to decide which you feel the strongest about and think you can argue the best.

Some people are able to read a story and know exactly what they would like to write about. This may not always be the case. If you don’t know what it is you want to write about, try the following: Think about the time period piece was written in, and why the author would have written what they did in that time. Are there things in the story that reflect societal issues of the time? Another thing you can think about: does this piece have any relevance on current societal issues/events? How so? How does this writing compare to more contemporary versions of itself? The answers to some of these questions might shed some light on an angle you can take when writing your paper. Again, try to pick a stance that interests you.

6. Find Evidence for Your Stance

Once you determine your stance on the text, you need to find evidence to back it up. Hopefully you already have evidence to back up your stance; now, you need to get it all
organized. Use those literary devices to determine what the author is doing with the text, and find examples of them in the text.

7. Unpack the Evidence

When writing a literary analysis, it is not enough to just find a quote from the book and drop it into your paper as an example of a literary device. When you use quotes or summary of the text to highlight a literary device, you have to explain how that device is being used. For example, if you are reading Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, and you are making the point that Shelley’s use of nature imagery is a reflection of Victor’s inner struggle, you need to explicitly say how your specific quote is accomplishing this by picking out the words and phrases used. This kind of unpacking might look like this:

> While on the water, Shelley makes us feel almost carefree with Frankenstein, using words and phrases such as “The spire of Evian shone...”, “soft air just ruffled the water...”, “pleasant motion”, “delightful scent.” However, as soon as Frankenstein reaches shore, the language changes. Words and phrases like “fears”, “to clasp me”, and “cling to me” bring us back to Frankenstein’s reality of horror... 

Note how specific words and phrases were picked apart by the writer, and how each was used to demonstrate the intent behind the author’s writing.

8. Analyze the Evidence

Once your evidence has been unpacked, you need to analyze it. This involves establishing your conclusions concerning the use of language, literary devices, etc., and why the writer is doing what they are doing with the text. Note the analysis of the *Frankenstein* passage below:

...Shelley sets up this seemingly happy scene, and then brings it crashing down to draw the reader into her story and help the them experience what Frankenstein is feeling: that everything is fine, until the fear takes over again.
The writer’s conclusion here is that Shelley is using the contrasting language to help us feel what Victor feels.

9. Tie the Analysis Back to the Claim

After analyzing your evidence, you need to tie it back to your claim by explaining how your analysis supports your stance. For example, if my claim for the novel of *Frankenstein* is that Shelley was attempting to highlight the dangers of human emotion over reasoning, then I might point out how causing the reader to feel emotion Victor is highlighting that pull of emotion over logical reasoning. Whatever your stance ends up being, all of the evidence you pull out of the novel must be tied back in some way to support your claim. If you forget this step, then you are left with a bunch of evidence that serves no purpose.

In Conclusion

Completing these steps will have you constructing the body of your paper. Steps 6-9 will be the basic composition for your body paragraphs, and will only leave you needing to add in some topic sentences and transitions. Following the steps in this study sheet should assist with making the process of writing a literary analysis less daunting.

Activity Sheets/Links to Additional Resources

For help getting started with formulating your stance for a literary analysis, check out our infographic, “Basics of a Literary Analysis”

The Oregon Department of Education has a good study sheet with definitions for Literary Devices and Elements: [A Glossary of Literary Terms](#)