**Writing a Literary Analysis Paper**

**The Purpose of a Literary Analysis:**

**A literary analysis** is not merely a summary of a literary work. Instead, it **is an argument**

**about the work that expresses a writer’s personal perspective, interpretation, judgment, or critical**

**evaluation of the work. This is accomplished by examining the literary devices, word choices, or**

**writing structures the author uses within the work.** The purpose of a literary analysis is to

demonstrate why the author used specific ideas, word choices, or writing structures to convey his or

her message.

**How to Create a Literary Analysis:**

**1. Read the text closely several times.** Focus on the ideas that are being presented. Think

about the characters’ development and the author’s writing technique. What might be

considered interesting, unusual, or important?

**2. Brainstorm a list of potential topics.** Highlight important passages in the text and take

notes on these passages. Later, when writing the paper, these notes should help a writer to

remember which aspects of the story caught his/her attention. The topic chosen should

always be based on a writer’s interpretation of the author’s message. Here are some things a

writer may want to consider when brainstorming for a literary analysis.

􀂙 **Character:** What observations might a writer make about the characters? Are there

discrepancies in what they think, say, or do? Are the observations a writer makes

different from what other characters say? How does the author describe the

characters? Are the characters “dynamic” (a dynamic character is a character that

undergoes important changes throughout the work)? Are the characters “static”

characters (a static character is a character that stays the same throughout the work)?

Are the characters “flat” characters (a flat character is a character that does not have

vivid character traits) or “round” characters (a round character is a character that has

vivid character traits)? Are the characters symbolic or representative of some

universal quality? Is it possible that two characters in the text might be compared or

contrasted?

􀂙 **Setting:** Is there a relationship between the work’s setting and its mood? Does the

setting reflect the work’s theme? How does the setting impact the characters? Does a

change in the setting affect the mood, characters, or conflict?

􀂙 **Plot:** How might the beginning of the work be interpreted? How does the plot build

suspense? Does the author use techniques such as foreshadowing or flashback? Are

there patterns of cause-effect relationships? Do events occur in a logical order?

Examine the events that lead to the climax and determine how the work ends?

􀂙 **Theme:** What is the major idea or theme of the work? How does the author relay

this theme? Is there a greater meaning to the details given? How do the characters’

moods affect the theme? What allusions are made throughout the work? Are there

repeating patterns or symbols? What does the title say about the theme?

􀂙 **Dialogue:** What is the purpose of the dialogue? Is the dialogue appropriate in terms

of word choice or sentence length? How does the dialogue impact the

characterization? How does the author use the dialogue to show the mood of the

characters? How does this aid the author’s message? How does the dialogue impact

the plot?

􀂙 **Imagery:** In what way might a specific image or series of images be analyzed? How

might the development of images throughout the work be explained? Are the images

important to the meaning of the work? How are images interrelated with other

literary elements?

􀂙 **Figures of speech:** How are figures of speech such as similes, metaphors, and

hyperboles used throughout the text? How are these figures of speech important in

relation to the meaning of the text? Are figures of speech interrelated between other

literary elements?

􀂙 **Tone:** How might describe the attitude of the author or the tone of the work be

described? Is the tone serious, playful, casual, formal, or somber? How does the

author achieve this tone? How does the tone impact the author’s message? Does the

author say one thing but mean another? Does the author take the subject seriously or

treat it lightly?

􀂙 **Rhyme/Rhythm:** Do the author’s words, sentences, or paragraphs seem to share a

similar rhyme pattern? What type of rhythm does the author seem to be creating?

How is this rhyme/rhythm impacting the author’s message? Does the author use the

different rhymes/rhythms as a sound device for the literary work? How does the

author do this?

􀂙 **Point of View:** What point of view do the characters display? First, second, or third?

How does this point of view affect the theme, plot, or conflict of the work? How

might the author’s point of view impact a writer’s analysis? Might the character’s first

person point of view draw a writer to feel as though he/she is hearing a personal

account and cause him/her to feel an intimate connection with the character? Might

the author’s third person account cause a writer to feel as if the author is acting as

the narrator of the story? Or might it cause a writer to believe that the narrator is an

omniscient being who is distant but knows the character’s thoughts and feelings?

**3. Think about what the author is trying to say.** Why is this important? When viewing this

work as a piece of art, what might a writer’s response be? What might a writer’s reactions be

to the ideas presented in the work? Are these ideas truthful or relevant to today and how? If

a writer were asked what they thought of this work how might they respond? What points

might a writer make?”

**4. Select a topic that has sufficient supporting evidence.** A writer should make sure to

include specific details to support the topic. Use highlighted sections of the book as evidence

to support the topic that has been chosen

**5. Write a working thesis.** The analysis will need a strong thesis that states a writer’s

perspective but also allows it to be debated. The thesis should state a writer’s opinion, but it

should also allow readers to arrive at their own conclusions.

􀂙 Example of a **debatable thesis**:

*Pride and Prejudice* is about Elizabeth Bennet’s effort to overcome her own proud

behavior and discrimination towards Mr. Darcy, as well as how her family is affected

by the haughtiness and preconceptions of the society around them.

(*This is a debatable thesis because it asks the reader, “Does Elizabeth actually exhibit haughtiness*

*and preconceptions? Is this why she doesn’t get along with Mr. Darcy? How is Elizabeth’s family*

*affected by the haughtiness and preconceptions of the society around them?”*)

􀂙 Avoid a **non-debatable thesis**:

*Pride and Prejudice* is about five sisters and their journey to find love.

(*This thesis is non-debatable because it is undisputable. The paper is framed as a summary rather*

*than as a literary analysis.*)

**6. Make an extended list of evidence.** Find more evidence from the text to support the

working thesis. Then select the evidence that will be used in the paper.

**7. Refine the thesis.** Make sure the thesis fits with the evidence that has been presented.

**8. Organize the evidence.** Match the evidence to the order of the thesis. Delete any of the

original textual supports that may no longer follow the thesis, and gather new evidence if

needed.

**9. Interpret the evidence.** When writing a literary analysis, it is very important for writers to

make sure they express their own personal interpretation of the work. Be careful that the

literary analysis is not a summary.

**10. Create a rough draft.** When writing a rough draft, there are several methods that may aid a

writer in creating a strong final draft. Here are a few methods:

􀂙 **Outline:** An outline will help a writer to organize his/her thoughts and ideas. It will

remind a writer of the order of the thesis, as well as the supporting points he/she

would like each topic sentence to have.

**11. Revise the Analysis**. After completing the first draft, revise the analysis

by considering the following questions:

􀂙 Is the thesis clearly stated in the first paragraph?

􀂙 Is the sentence structure varied?

􀂙 Does the structure of the analysis emphasize the main ideas?

􀂙 Is the third-person point of view used throughout the entire essay?

􀂙 Has the present tense been used to discuss the work and past tense to describe the

author’s background?

􀂙 Have quotation marks been used around direct quotations?

􀂙 Has extraneous information that does not support the thesis been eliminated?

􀂙 Have clear transitions been used between sentences and paragraphs?

**12. Proofread.** Once the content of the essay is well-developed, it should be proofread for

grammar, punctuation, and spelling. It is often helpful to read the paper slowly and clearly

out loud. If possible, another person should listen and read along as the paper is being read.

The paper should be printed and proofread several times until an accurate final copy is

created. Be alert to common grammatical errors such as sentence fragments, comma splices,

or run-on sentences. Remember to consult a style manual for grammatical or citation

questions, and if further assistance is desired, group workshops and individual appointments

are available free of charge through Tutoring Services.