

Conventions for Writing a Literary Analysis Paper

This handout can be used in conjunction with the Tutoring Center's resource, *How to Write a Literary Analysis Paper*.

Your Writing Style and Voice

Use formal, academic diction (word choice) in a literary analysis. Therefore, write in the third person. First person (I, me, our, we, etc.) and second person (you) are too informal for academic writing, and most literature professors prefer students to write in third person.

The Literary Present

Do not write about a literary text in the past tense. Instead, use the "literary present." Literary works are considered to exist in the present tense. In academic writing, it is expected that you will write a literary analysis in the present tense.

Audience

Consider your audience as you write your literary analysis. Assume that your audience is your professor and other students in your class. Remember, you do not need to retell or summarize the piece of literature. Instead, **your purpose is to analyze and interpret the literary work** in relation to your thesis (your argument). Therefore, **avoid plot summary** in a literary analysis.

Organization

- As with other types of academic writing, a literary analysis should adhere to the introduction, body paragraph, conclusion model.
- **Your argument and your voice must carry the weight in a literary analysis paper.** Even if you incorporate research in your paper, be sure that it supports your own argument and does not overtake *your voice*.
- Again, avoid plot summary, and construct a specific thesis statement that conveys a claim that you will prove in your body paragraphs.

1. Introductory Paragraph

- The **thesis statement** should typically appear in your first paragraph and is usually embedded at the end of this introductory paragraph.
 - In a lengthy research paper, sometimes the thesis statement appears in the second paragraph.
- You must make clear, full reference to the literary work and author you are writing about somewhere in your introductory paragraph.
- Include any relevant background information that your reader might need to understand your overall purpose.

2. Body/Developmental Paragraphs

- Each subsequent paragraph after the introduction must include topic sentences, and these topic sentences, as well as the content of each paragraph, must support the thesis statement.
 - Topic sentences (usually the first sentence in each paragraph):
 1. Relate the details of the paragraph to your overall thesis.
 2. Tie the details of the paragraph together (paragraph unity).
- A solid literary analysis contains an explanation of your ideas and evidence

from the text for the purpose of supporting your ideas. **Textual evidence** consists of **specific details, direct quotations, summaries, and/or paraphrases.**

- The substance of each of your body paragraphs will be the explanations, summaries, paraphrases, specific details, and direct quotations you need to support and develop the more general statement you have made in your topic sentence.

3. Conclusion

The conclusion should tie together your essay's argument and ideas. Some approaches to the conclusion are as follows: restating the thesis (in different words) and expanding on its importance, summarizing the essay's main points and pondering their significance, commenting on the literary work from a difference perspective. The conclusion should not introduce a new topic that has not been touched on in your essay.

The Thesis Statement

Remember, a literary analysis paper requires you to pose an argument and provide detailed examples from the text to support that argument. The thesis statement establishes the overall point of your essay, and it fulfills two main objectives:

1. The thesis must *state your topic*.
2. The thesis must convey *what you will prove about your topic* (your opinion about that topic).

*The thesis statement is most often embedded in the introductory paragraph, usually at the end of that paragraph. Occasionally, as in the below example, a thesis statement might consist of more than one sentence.

According to the *Simon & Schuster Handbook for Writers*, the basic requirements for a thesis statement include the following:

- the essay's subject—the topic that you discuss
- the essay's purpose—either informative or persuasive
- your focus—the assertion that presents your point of view
- specific language—not vague words
- brief overview of the topic's subdivisions

(Troyka and Hesse 45)

Try this strategy to develop and narrow a thesis statement.

To write an effective thesis statement, start with a general idea and then sharpen your focus.

Step 1: Choose a topic, e.g., the poem “Theme for English B” by Langston Hughes

Step 2: Focus the topic, e.g., biographical influences in “Theme for English B,” especially the poet's race, and how literary critics assess such influences on this poem

Step 3: Narrow the topic further by posing it as a question.

E.g., How do critics classify Hughes's poems, especially those that are related to race?

How did Hughes’s experience as an African American man affect his poetry? What elements in the poem reflect Hughes’s experience as an African American man?

Step 4: Answer the question. The answer is your thesis statement.

E.g., Critics classify Langston Hughes’s work into poems of social and “racial protest” and poems of “racial affirmation” (DiYanni 522-523). “Theme for English B,” however, does not nestle neatly within either category, as it exudes a more complicated tone of both pride and frustration.

**Notice that this thesis statement proposes an argument and specifies particular literary elements that will be analyzed to help substantiate or prove the argument. This thesis statement also refers to literary critics and uses a quote from a secondary source. Be sure to ask your professor if it is acceptable to do research for a literary analysis as well as if it is acceptable to refer to an outside source in the thesis statement. Doing so will depend on the parameters of your specific assignment.

Your thesis statement should be clear and direct and should entice your audience to read further. Each subsequent paragraph in the body of your paper should support your thesis statement and prove your claim.

Proper Writing and Citation of Direct Quotations

Direct quotations are one type of textual evidence that can be used to support your interpretation of a literary text.

Use quotations sparingly.

Remember to use quotations with discretion. Do not saturate your paper with overuse of quotations. Rather, use only relevant quotations *to support your ideas*. Limit quoting to key statements and ideas.

Integrate quotations smoothly.

When you use quotations, work them into your writing as smoothly as possible. To do so, pay attention to style and punctuation. Use “signal phrases” to introduce a quotation. Never end a paragraph with a quotation. Your own interpretation or analysis should *always* follow a quotation. Try the “sandwich” technique. See the below formula and examples.

Example 1: “Sandwiching” Quotations

In her essay “The Ghosts of Ellis Island,” Mary Gordon observes, “The minute I set foot upon the island I could feel all that it stood for: insecurity, obedience, anxiety, dehumanization, the terrified and careful deference of the displaced” (392). Gordon blends her personal point of view with a historical perspective to characterize the immigrant experience of profound dispossession.

Work Cited

Gordon, Mary. “The Ghosts of Ellis Island.” The Writer’s Presence: A Pool of Readings.

3rd ed. Ed. Donald McQuade and Robert Atwan. New York and Boston:

Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2000.

1. Introduce the quote to provide context for the reader.

- Include the title and author if you are using the source for the first time.
- Use a “signal phrase” to introduce the quote (author’s name + verb).

2. Direct Quote

- Use a direct quote when an author writes in specialized or particularly powerful language and when such textual evidence enhances your paper’s argument.
- Be precise. Do not use a quote from an outside source (secondary source) if it is not well written or if you can state the point more clearly in your own words. In that case, you might summarize or paraphrase the author’s ideas. If you summarize or paraphrase, you must still cite the source to credit the author.

3. Your Analysis / Interpretation of the Quote

- Explain and discuss how the quote is significant. Relate the quote to **your purpose** in your paper.
- Demonstrate that this quote serves to make a particular point in your argument.

Example 2: Student Writing

The following excerpt is from Elizabeth A. Vassallo’s essay, “Protest Music of the Vietnam War: A Struggling Generation Moved to Action.” This essay was published in Fresh Ink: Essays from Boston College’s First-Year Writing Seminar 2002. Notice the organization and the use of an indirect quote, as indicated by the parenthetical notation (qtd. in...).

[...] Former President Bill Clinton credits Bob Dylan with “providing those who protested the Vietnam War with a moral compass as accessible to the nearest radio” (qtd. in “Voice of America”). Clearly, though, Bob Dylan did not speak for his generation on his own, but rather was aided by many other musicians who also decided that it was time to truly speak up to their contemporaries and to the world.

Work Cited

“Voice of America: At 60, Bob Dylan Is Still His Generation’s Troubadour.” Editorial.

Pittsburgh-Post Gazette (23 May 2001): A-24.

Important Notes:

- Prose quotations longer than four lines should be set off in block quotes, indented 10 spaces from the left margin and double spaced, without quotation marks.
- Poetry quotations longer than three lines should be set off in block quotes, centered and double spaced, without quotation marks. Indicate page numbers for prose and line numbers for poetry. See The MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers by Joseph Gibaldi for more information on properly citing sources and correct formatting of citations.
- If you have questions about citing sources, ask them **before** turning in your paper. Ideally, make an appointment to see your instructor and/or a Writing Tutor.

Your Essay's Title

Be sure to give your literary analysis essay a title. The title should be indicative of your essay's approach or perspective on the literary text. Do not use the title of the literary work as the title of your paper. Consult the MLA Handbook (or any writing or grammar handbook) for information on proper capitalization and punctuation of titles.

Proper Formatting for Titles of Literary Works and Other Media

Use the correct format for referring to the work you are discussing. The titles of short stories, poems, and essays should be placed in quotation marks. The titles of novels, plays, films, and TV shows should be either underlined or italicized:

"My Last Duchess"	(poem)
<i>Antigone</i>	(play)
"The Secret Lion"	(short story)
<u>Forest Gump</u>	(movie)
<u>Pride and Prejudice</u>	(novel)
<i>The Simpsons</i>	(TV show)

Differentiation Between Speaker and Author

Often in literature, the speaker is not the author. One aspect of literary analysis entails exploring the relationship between author and speaker. Carefully analyze point of view and tone. Consider the author's intended meaning; however, do not mistake the opinions of the narrator for those of the writer.

Literary Analysis Checklist

1. Is the topic you have chosen to write about manageable for the length of the paper you are writing? Is the topic too narrow or too broad?
2. Is your title engaging? Does it suggest the approach you are taking in your paper?
3. Does your first paragraph introduce your topic, name the writer and the work, and end with your thesis statement? Will it get the reader's attention?
4. Is your thesis clear? Does it state the central idea of your paper and make a claim (state an opinion) that you will prove in your body paragraphs?
5. Is your paper organized in a way that your reader will be able to follow?
6. Are your developmental paragraphs unified (everything in the paragraph relates to the topic of the paragraph) and coherent (everything in the paragraph is arranged in a logical order)?
7. Do all of your body paragraphs support your thesis and further your argument?
8. Have you used transitional words where necessary within each paragraph? Are there transitions linking all the paragraphs of your essay and indicating the direction of your thinking?
9. Have you used literary terms correctly?
10. Have you used brief summary, paraphrase, specific details, and direct quotations as evidence to support your claims? Have you explained how these details support your central idea?
11. Have you correctly formatted, punctuated, and cited (according to MLA Style) all summaries, paraphrases, and quotations? Have you included the required *Works Cited* page? Does every in-text citation have a corresponding entry on the *Works Cited* page?
12. If you have used information from sources outside the actual work of literature (for example, books of criticism), have you properly documented this information? To provide documentation for literary papers, you need to use **MLA documentation style, which can found in most writing handbooks and in books on how to write research papers, as well as an additional Tutoring Center handout. The *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* by Joseph Gibaldi is the authoritative text on MLA documentation.**
13. Does your concluding paragraph provide a sense of closure and tie together your ideas?
14. Have you carefully proofread your final draft for content, style, grammar, and mechanics?