

**Chesapeake College  
Writing Center**

**Writing a Literary Analysis**

In writing about literature, we can offer only our interpretation of meaning rather than the meaning. However, there are limits to interpretation: it must be supported by evidence that a reasonable reader finds plausible.

**Questions for a Literary Analysis**

**PLOT:** the relationships and patterns of events (Even a poem has a plot--for instance a change in mood from bitterness to resignation)

What actions happen?  
What conflicts occur?  
How do the events connect to each other and to the whole?

**CHARACTERS:** the people the author creates (including the narrator of a story or the speaker of a poem)

Who are the principle people in the work?  
How do they interact?  
What do their actions, words, and thoughts reveal about their personalities and the personalities of others?  
Do the characters stay the same, or do they change? Why?

**POINT OF VIEW:** the perspective or attitude of the speaker in a poem or the voice who tells a story  
The point of view may be **first person** (a participant using I) or **third person** (an outsider, using he, she, it, or they.) A first-person narrator may be a major or a minor character in the narrative, and may be **reliable** or **unreliable** (unable to report events accurately). A third-person narrator may be **omniscient** (knows what goes on in all characters' minds), **limited** (knows what goes on in the mind of only one character), or **objective** (knows what is external to the characters).

Who is the narrator (or speaker of a poem)?  
How does the narrator's point of view affect the narrative?

**TONE:** the narrator's or speaker's attitude, perceived through the words (for instance, joyful, bitter, confident)

What tone (or tones) do you hear?  
If there is a change, how do you account for it?  
Is there an ironic contrast between the narrator's tone (for instance, confidence) and what you take to be the author's attitude (for instance, pity for human overconfidence)?

**IMAGERY:** word pictures or visual details involving the senses (sight, sound, touch, smell, taste)

What images does the writer use?

What senses do they draw on?

What patterns are evident in the images (for instance, religious or commercial images)?

What is the significance of the imagery?

**SYMBOLS:** concrete things standing for larger and more abstract ideas (for instance, the American flag may symbolize freedom, a tweeting bird may symbolize happiness, or a dead flower may symbolize mortality)

What symbols does the author use?

What do they seem to signify?

How does the symbolism relate to the other elements of the work, such as character or theme?

**SETTING:** the place where the action happens

What does the locale contribute to the story?

Are scene shifts significant?

**FORM:** the shape or structure of the work

What is the form? (For example, a story might divide in the middle, moving from happiness to sorrow.)

What parts of the work does the form emphasize, and why?

**THEME:** the main idea, the gist of what the work adds up to

How might the theme be stated?





How do the parts of the work develop the theme?

**APPEAL:** the degree to which the story pleases you

What do you especially like or dislike about the work?

Do you think your responses are unique or common to most readers? Why?

### Guidelines for Using Quotations in Literary Analysis

-  Use quotations to support your assertions, not to pad the paper. Quote at length only when necessary to your argument.
-  When you use a quotation, specify how it relates to your idea. Introduce the quotation. Sometimes comment after the quotation.
-  Reproduce spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and all other features exactly as they appear in the source.
-  Document your sources.

### Checklist for Revising a Literary Analysis

- ✎ Does the title of the essay consist of more than the title of the work? Your title should give the reader an idea of your topic.
- ✎ Does the introductory paragraph avoid openings such as "In this story. . . ."? Name the author and the title so that the reader knows exactly what work you are discussing. Develop your thesis a bit so the readers know where they will be going.
- ✎ Is the organization effective? The essay should not dwindle or become anticlimactic; rather, it should build up
- ✎ Do quotations provide evidence and let the reader hear the author's voice?
- ✎ Is the essay chiefly devoted to analysis, not summary? Do not summarize the plot in great detail. A couple of sentences may be helpful if your readers are not familiar with the work, but a summary is not an essay.
- ✎ Have you used present tense of verbs to describe both the author's work and the action in the work (for example, Chopin shows or Mrs. Mallard dies)?
- ✎ If you have used the first-person I (for instance, I find the ending plausible), have you avoided using it so often that you sound egotistical? [It is best to avoid first person altogether.]
- ✎ Is your evaluation of the work evident? It may be understood, or it may be explicit. In either case, give the reasons for judging the work to be effective or not, worth reading or not. Remember that it is not enough to express your likes and dislikes; readers will be interested in an evaluation only if you support it with evidence.

Did you document your sources?

### Questions for Analyzing Fiction

- ✎ What happens in the story? Summarize the plot (the gist of the happenings). Think about what your summary leaves out.
- ✎ Is the story told in chronological order, or are there flashbacks or flashforwards? On rereading, what foreshadowing (hints of what is to come) do you detect?
- ✎ What conflicts does the work include?
- ✎ How does the writer reveal character--for instance, by explicit comment or by letting us see the character in action? With which character(s) do you sympathize? Are the characters plausible? What motivates them? What do minor characters contribute to the work?
- ✎ Who tells the story? Is the narrator a character, or does the narrator stand entirely outside the characters' world?
- ✎ What are the setting, the time and place of the action? What does the setting contribute to the work?

- ✎ Do certain characters or settings seem to you to stand for something in addition to themselves--that is, what does the work add up to?
- ✎ What is the theme--that is, what does the work add up to? Does the theme reinforce values that you hold, or does it challenge them?
- ✎ Is the title informative? Did the meaning change for you after you read the work?

### Questions for Analyzing Poetry

- ✎ What parts interest or puzzle you?
- ✎ How would you describe the poem's speaker (sometimes called the **persona** or the **voice**)? (The speaker may be different from the author.) What tone or emotion do you detect--for instance, anger, affection, sarcasm? Does the tone change during the poem?
- ✎ What is the structure of the poem? Are there stanzas (groups of lines separated by space)? If so, how is the thought related to the stanzas?
- ✎ What is the theme of the poem: what is it about? Is the theme stated or implied?
- ✎ What images do you find--evocations of sight, sound, taste, touch, or smell? Is there a surprising pattern of images--say, images of business in a poem about love? What does the poem suggest symbolically as well as literally? (Trust your responses. If you don't sense a symbolic overtone, move on. Don't hunt for symbols.)

### Questions for Analyzing Drama

- ✎ Does the plot (the sequence of happenings) seem plausible? If not, is the implausibility a fault? If there is more than one plot, are the plots parallel, or are they related by way of contrast?
- ✎ What kinds of conflict are in the play? How are the conflicts resolved? Is the resolution satisfying to you?
- ✎ How trustworthy are the characters when they describe themselves or others? Do some characters serve as foils, or contrasts, for other characters, thus helping to define the other characters? Do the characters change as the play proceeds? Are the characters' motivations convincing?
- ✎ What do you make of the setting, or location? Does it help to reveal character or theme?
- ✎ Do certain costumes (dark suits, shawls, stiff collars) or properties (books, pictures, candlesticks) strike you as symbolic?
- ✎ If a film has been made of the play, what has been added? What has been omitted?

**SOURCE:** Fowler, H. Ramsey, and Jane E. Aaron, eds. The Little, Brown Handbook. 7th ed. New York: Longman, 1998.