

A Guide to Writing the Literary Analysis Essay

I. INTRODUCTION- the first paragraph in your essay. It begins creatively in order to catch the reader's attention, provides essential background information about the literary work, and it prepares the reader for your major thesis. The introduction must also include the *author and title* of the work as well as an explanation of the theme/topic to be explored. Other essential background may include setting, an introduction to the main characters, etc. The thesis is usually towards or at the end of the introductory paragraph. Because the thesis sometimes sounds tacked on, make special attempts to mesh it to the preceding sentence, sometimes accomplished by using a key word or an idea.

A. Creative opening/hook: the beginning sentences of the introduction must catch the reader's interest. Here are some creative beginnings:

1) A startling fact or bit of information

Example: Nearly two hundred citizens were arrested as witches during the Salem witch scare of 1692. Eventually nineteen were hanged, and another was pressed to death (Marks 65).

2. A meaningful quote (from the book you are analyzing or another source)

Example: "To be, or not to be, that is the question" (3.1.57). This familiar statement expresses the young prince's moral dilemma in William Shakespeare's tragedy *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*.

3. A universal idea-

Example: The terrifying scenes a soldier experiences on the front probably follow him throughout his life—if he manages to survive the war.

4. A rich, vivid description of the setting:

Example: Sleepy Maycomb, like other Southern towns, suffers considerably during the Great Depression. Poverty reaches from the privileged families, like the Finches, to the Negroes and "white trash" Ewells, who live on the outskirts of the town. Harper Lee paints a colorful canvas of life in this humid Alabama town where tempers and bigotry explode into conflict.

B. THESIS: a statement which provides the subject and overall opinion of your essay. For a literary analysis your major thesis must (1) relate to the theme of the work and (2) suggest how this theme is revealed by the author. A good thesis might even suggest the organization of the paper, but this is not necessary. Sometimes it creates wordiness.

EXAMPLE: Through Paul's experience behind the lines, at a Russian prisoner of war camp, especially under bombardment in the trenches, Erich Maria Remarque realistically depicts how war dehumanizes a man.

Sometimes a thesis becomes too cumbersome to fit into one sentence. If so, express in two sentences.

Example: In the novel, *A Tale of Two Cities*, Charles Dickens shows the process by which a wasted life can be redeemed. Sidney Carton, through his love for Lucie Manette, is transformed from a hopeless, bitter man into a hero whose life and death have meaning.

II. BODY PARAGRAPHS

A. Body: These are the support paragraphs of your essay. They contain supporting details in the form of concrete details and analysis/explanation (commentary) for your topic sentences. Each paragraph in the body includes (1) a topic sentence, (2) textual evidence (a.k.a. quotes from your reading) and commentary (a.k.a. explanation), and (3) a concluding sentence. In its simplest form, each body paragraph is organized as follows:

1. topic sentence
2. lead-in to textual evidence 1
3. textual evidence 1
4. commentary
5. transition and lead-in to textual evidence 2
6. textual evidence 2
7. commentary
8. concluding or clincher sentence

1) **Topic Sentence:** the first sentence of a body or support paragraph. It identifies one aspect of the major thesis and states a primary reason why the major thesis is true.

Example: When he first appears in the novel, Sidney Carton is a loveless outcast who sees little worth in himself or in others.

2) **Textual Evidence:** a specific example from the work used to provide evidence for your topic sentence. Textual evidence can be a combination of paraphrase and direct quotation from the work.

Example: When Carton and Darnay first meet in the tavern, Carton tells him, "I care for no man on this earth, and no man cares for me" (Dickens 105).

3) **Commentary:** your explanation and interpretation of the textual evidence. Commentary tells the reader what the author of the text means or how the textual evidence proves the topic sentence. Commentary may include interpretation, analysis, argument, insight, and/or reflection. (Helpful hint: In your body paragraph, you should have twice as much commentary as textual evidence. In other words, for every sentence of textual evidence, you should have at least two sentences of commentary.)

- ✓ **Example:** Carton makes this statement as if he were excusing his rude behavior to Darnay. Carton, however, is only pretending to be polite, perhaps to amuse himself. With this seemingly off-the-cuff remark, Carton reveals a deeper cynicism and his emotional isolation.

4) **Transitions:** words or phrases that connect or “hook” one idea to the next, both between and within paragraphs. Transition devices include using connecting words as well as repeating key words or using synonyms.

- ✓ **Examples:** Finally, in the climax... Another example: ...
Later in the story... In contrast to this behavior...
Not only... but also... Furthermore...

5) **Lead-In:** phrase or sentence that prepares the reader for textual evidence by introducing the speaker, setting, and/or situation.

- ✓ **Example:** Later, however, when the confident Sidney Carton returns alone to his home, his alienation and unhappiness become apparent: “Climbing into a high chamber in a well of houses, he threw himself down in his clothes on a neglected bed, and its pillow was wet with wasted tears” (Dickens 211).

6) **Clincher/Concluding Sentence:** last sentence of the body paragraph. It concludes the paragraph by tying the textual evidence and commentary back to the thesis.

- ✓ **Example:** Thus, before Carton experiences love, he is able to convince himself that the world has no meaning.

III. CONCLUSION: last paragraph in your essay. This paragraph should begin by echoing your major thesis without repeating the words exactly. Then, the conclusion should broaden from the thesis statements to answer the “so what?” question your reader may have after reading your essay. The conclusion should do one or more of the following:

- 1) Reflect on how your essay topic relates to the book as a whole
- 2) Evaluate how successful the author is in achieving his or her goal or message
- 3) Give a personal statement about the topic
- 4) Make predictions
- 5) Connect back to your creative opening
- 6) Give your opinion of the novel’s value or significance

HOW TO CITE TEXTUAL EVIDENCE WITHIN YOUR PAPER

PRIMARY SOURCE: The literary work (novel, play, story, poem) to be discussed in an essay.

- ✓ **Example:** : Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men*
Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Tell-tale Heart”

****For most literary analysis papers, you will be using ONLY PRIMARY SOURCES**

SECONDARY SOURCE: Any source (other than the primary source) referred to in the essay. Secondary sources can include critical analyses, biographies of the author, reviews, history books, encyclopedias etc.

When citing primary or secondary sources, follow MLA style for parenthetical documentation and “Works Cited” page.

WORKS CITED: a separate page listing all the works cited in an essay. It simplifies documentation because it permits you to make only brief references to those works in the text (parenthetical documentation). A “Works Cited” page differs from a “Bibliography” in that the latter includes sources researched but not actually cited in the paper. All the entries on a “Works Cited” page are double spaced.

PARENTHETICAL DOCUMENTATION: a brief parenthetical reference placed where a pause would naturally occur to avoid disrupting the flow of your writing (usually at the end of a sentence, before the period).

Most often you will use the author’s last name and page number clearly referring to a source listed on the “Works Cited” page:

- ✓ **Example:** Hemingway’s writing declined in his later career (Shien 789).

If you cite the author in the text of your paper, give only the page number in parentheses:

- ✓ **Example:** According to Francis Guerin, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* reflects “those same nightmarish shadows that even in our own time threaten to obscure the American Dream” (49).

If two works by the same author appear in your “Works Cited,” add the title or a shortened version of it to distinguish your sources:

- ✓ **Example:** “He wouldn’t rest until he had run a mile or more” (Dickens, *A Tale* 78).

BLOCK QUOTATION: quotations that are set off from the rest of the paper. Indent one-inch from the left margin only and double space. Do not use quotation marks unless they appear in the original.

1) For a prose quotation of more than 4 typed lines, start the quotation after a colon and indent each line of the quotation 10 spaces, placing the citation *after* the end punctuation.

- ✓ **Example:**

Based on rumors and gossip, the children of Maycomb speculate about

Boo Radley’s appearance:

Boo was about six-and-a-half feet tall, judging from his tracks; he dined on raw squirrels and any cats he could catch, that’s why his hands were bloodstained—if you ate an animal raw, you could never wash the blood off. There was a long jagged scar that ran across his face; what teeth he had were yellow and rotten; his eyes popped, and he drooled most of the time. (Lee 13)

2) For any prose dialogue involving 2 or more speakers, start the quotation (dialogue) after a colon and have each line of dialogue as its own paragraph (a 10-space indentation), placing the citation information *after* the end punctuation.

- ✓ **Example:**

During the trial scene, Bob Ewell immediately shows his disrespect for both the court and his family:

“Are you the father of Mayella Ewell?” was the next question.

“Well, if I ain’t I can’t do nothing about it now, her ma’s dead,” was the answer. (Lee 172)

Outline Structure for Literary Analysis Essay

- I. Catchy Title
- II. Paragraph 1: Introduction (Use HATMAT)
 - A. Hook
 - B. Author
 - C. Title
 - D. Main characters
 - E. A short summary
 - F. Thesis
- III. Paragraph 2: First Body Paragraph
 - A. Topic sentence (what this paragraph will discuss, how it will prove your thesis)
 - B. Context for the quote
 1. Who says it?
 2. What's happening in the text when they say it?
 - C. Quote from the text (cited appropriately)
 - D. Analysis of the quote: How does it prove your thesis?
 - E. Closing sentence (wrap up the paragraph to effectively transition to the next paragraph)
- IV. Paragraph 3: Second Body Paragraph
 - A. Topic sentence (what this paragraph will discuss, how it will prove your thesis)
 - B. Context for the quote
 1. Who says it?
 2. What's happening in the text when they say it?
 - C. Quote from the text (cited appropriately)
 - D. Analysis of the quote: How does it prove your thesis?
 - E. Closing sentence (wrap up the paragraph to effectively transition to the next paragraph)
- V. Paragraph 4: Third Body Paragraph
 - A. Topic sentence (what this paragraph will discuss, how it will prove your thesis)
 - B. Context for the quote
 1. Who says it?
 2. What's happening in the text when they say it?
 - C. Quote from the text (cited appropriately)
 - D. Analysis of the quote: How does it prove your thesis?
 - E. Closing sentence (wrap up the paragraph to effectively transition to the next paragraph)
- VI. Conclusion (You do not necessarily have to follow this order, but include the following):
 - A. Summarize your argument.
 - B. Extend the argument.
 - C. Show why the text is important.