



## UNIVERSITY WRITING CENTER

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### Literary Analysis

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The purpose of this article is to demonstrate how to perform a literary analysis and write compelling arguments about literary texts.

#### Reading Well

Every writer knows the thrill of encountering a well-told, life-altering story. The first thing they want to do after putting the book down is to talk about it with their friends. This reflection and discussion lies at the heart of literary analysis: understanding how and why a story is so great. The goal of a literary analysis essay is to focus on a specific theme or literary device of a poem, play, short story, or novel to explore its deeper meaning. A literary analysis essay focuses on perspectives and asks students to explain how they believe the text should be interpreted. This can include, for example, a detailed character sketch, an examination of a repetitive metaphor/simile, or the importance of the setting. As with most essays, a successful literary analysis depends on the quality of the central argument or thesis.

The goal of the essay is to persuade your audience to understand, if not to agree, with your perspective of the text. A close reading of the text will help you think deeply about the purpose of each creative element in the story. This consists of looking through the literature and making a note of the author's choices, analyzing each decision as if they were under a microscope. Formulate several questions regarding the author's choices, which may consider word choice/diction, narrative, theme, or symbol. For example, why does the author choose a particular word that carries so many different connotations? Or how does the end of the plot indicate what the author thinks about his subject? What does a character's outlook on life say about herself, the world, or even God?

#### Writing Well

When you begin your essay, start by creating your thesis. Use the clues gathered from the close reading to create a strong thesis that argues the importance of a specific element of the text and the reasoning behind it. Consider what specifically stood out to you within the text to develop your thesis. As you return to your notes during your close reading, identify what the reasoning may be behind each of these points. Then, gather all the necessary textual evidence that will help you prove your thesis in a clear and logical way.

Effective close reading is necessary to formulate a strong thesis, the foundation of the literary analysis essay. That thesis will be supported by several key claims, supporting points, and textual evidence discussed throughout the essay. While much of your argument may be subjective, you strengthen your interpretation by relying on the objective evidence provided in the text. In this way, you can share your perspective more persuasively. Through sharing our perspectives about art, argument, and interpretation with other writers, we can deepen our understanding of the text, ourselves, and each other.

#### Example

The thesis should argumentatively state the writer's position and should be followed by reasoning and evidence. Reading Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, a writer might focus on different aspects of the novel and create a version of any of the following theses:

#### *Word Choice*

"Mary Shelley's word choice in *Frankenstein*, which uses archaic and obscure language, helps to set the horrific and gothic atmosphere of the story."

#### *Narrative*

"Mary Shelley's twisting plot with multiple narrators helps to misdirect the reader before revealing the truth and horror behind each deed."

#### *Theme*

"The theme evident in *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley is that flawed humanity cannot create life, which is showcased in the destruction of all Victor loves."

#### *Form*

"By writing *Frankenstein* in epistolary form, Shelley effectively creates a more personal tone that allows her to connect with the reader."

#### *Subject*

"Mary Shelley's focus on the spiral of the creature shows that she believes monsters are created, not born."

### **Tips**

1. The first time reading through the text, note everything that seems even mildly important. Don't be afraid to "overanalyze" key factors of the text to garner enough information. The more you have, the easier it will be to write about it.
2. Take highly detailed notes as you read, including page numbers to make it easier for you to reference later.
3. Be sure your thesis contains the *what*, the *how*, and the *why*. What are you arguing about the text? How does the author reveal it in the text? Why is it significant for understanding the text?

### **Works Consulted**

- "A Short Guide to Close Reading for Literary Analysis." *University of Wisconsin-Madison*, <https://writing.wisc.edu/handbook/closerreading/>. Accessed 25 July 2024.
- Caulfield, Jack. "How to Write a Literary Analysis Essay | a Step-by-step Guide." *Scribbr*, 14 Aug. 2023, <https://www.scribbr.com/academic-essay/literary-analysis/>.
- "Writing a Literary Analysis Paper." *Germanna Academic Center for Excellence*. <https://germanna.edu/sites/default/files/2022-03/Literary%20Analysis.pdf> Accessed 17 Jan 2024.