

## **Writing a Literary Analysis or Critical Essay** From *Write for College*

While a personal response explores impressions and a review evaluates a text, a literary analysis interprets a text. In a limited literary analysis the author relies upon his/her own knowledge and close reading for interpretation; in an extended literary analysis or report, the author would also include the views of accomplished critics.

An analysis can take various forms:

- Explication – line by line, stanza by stanza, or section by section exploration of a work – of a part or the whole text
- Analysis – tracing one issue throughout the text
- Comparison/contrast – of two texts or of two elements within a text

Extended analyses develop from critical approaches – formalistic, biographical, sociological, etc. The approach should “match” the text and grow out of their critical questions. Ideas, not sources, should dominate the essay. Secondary sources should extend interpretation – not substitute for it- by clarifying background, lending authoritative support, or offering alternate readings. All references and quotations should be carefully integrated.

### **Tips for writing an analysis or critical essay**

1. Your **opening paragraph or introduction** should grab your reader’s attention and identify the focus of your analysis in a **thesis statement**. The thesis statement should suggest the organization of your paper or include an organization statement following it. A developed “attention step” may use the following methods:

- **Summarize** your subject briefly. Include the title, author, and background context. This can be effective for historical papers or for timed prompts but is generally too simplistic for a college level literary analysis.
- Start with a **quotation** from the book or from an authoritative source about your topic. Make sure that you comment on the quote’s relevance immediately afterward.
- Use an **analogy** relating the focus of your analysis to a current event or issue that would interest or relate to the reader.
- Use a **definition**. It could be the type of literature being analyzed or a specific technique or device that will prove relevant to your topic.
- When the topic has an obvious importance or overwhelming influence, highlight the **magnitude** of the topic.
- A **narrative** attention getter is generally a story related to the topic used to catch the reader’s attention. A more personal form of this method is to use an **anecdote**. These are particularly effective if you have a personal connection to the topic.
- A **rhetorical question** can also be used to introduce your topic, though they are generally more effective in persuasive pieces rather than expository ones.
- **Cause/Effect; Problem/Solution; Comparison/Contrast** – depending upon the organization method of your paper and the focus of your thesis an introduction may reflect these methods as well.

2) The **body paragraphs** of your paper should provide sufficient support to substantiate your thesis. Make sure that you do the following:

- State each main point or topic sentence clearly so that it relates back to the focus of your analysis or thesis.
- Support each main point with specific details (paraphrased or summarized), direct quotations, and authoritative sources if necessary. Cite them appropriately by page number or line number if using a single text, in MLA parenthetical citation and works cited if using multiple texts.
- Explain how each of these specific details helps prove your point.
- Organize your paragraphs so that each one deals with a separate main point or idea. Choose the method of organization in your paper and paragraphs to enhance your work, whether chronological, logical, comparison/contrast, order of most importance, etc.

3) A **conclusion** should stress the importance of the thesis, give the essay a sense of completeness, and leave the reader with a final impression. It may answer the question “so what?” It should NOT simply restate things that were in your paper. Show the reader how the points you made come together to support your thesis – synthesize! Create new meaning; you don’t have to give new info (and you really shouldn’t in conclusion) to create new meaning. By demonstrating how your ideas work together, you can create a new picture. Often the sum of the paper is worth more than the parts. Some strategies include the following:

- **Echoing the introduction.** Bring your reader full circle. If you started with something anecdotal, end with the same scenario as proof that your essay was helpful in creating a new understanding. If your introduction went from general to specific, make your conclusion the opposite. (“The Hook and Return.”)
- **Challenging the reader.** By issuing a challenge to the readers, you are helping them redirect the information in the paper and apply it to their own lives. (persuasive, argumentative, expository) Sometimes called “call to action.”
- **Looking to the future.** Emphasize the importance of your paper or redirect the readers’ thought process. Tie your topic to a larger philosophical question, political issue, or view of the human condition. It may help to apply the new information to their lives or see things more globally.
- **Posing questions.** Posing questions, either to your readers or in general, may help readers to gain a new perspective on the topic, which they may not have had before reading your conclusion. It may also bring your main ideas together to create a new meaning.
- **Simple Summary.** In long essays on unfamiliar concepts, restating the main points of the essay might be effective. This type, however, can make shorter essays seem dull. Not recommended for English essays.
- **Delayed thesis conclusion.** Used to explore many angles, of a controversial topic perhaps, the writer opens with a question or problem and deals with a variety of solutions and/or proposals. In the conclusion, the writer states the thesis as a discovery.
- **Remember to make your last statement a powerful “clincher,” short and to the point usually works best or an effective quotation might work!**

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4) Some words about **style** in your writing...refer to the Composition Packet for definitions and examples if necessary.

- Use the “literary present tense” when writing about texts.
- Consider parallel structure for the sake of clarity, not just in your thesis and sentences but in your paper as a whole. Are your body paragraphs equally developed? Did you structure them in a similar fashion? (Parallel structure can also be effective as a persuasive device.)
- Beware of long, stringy, wordy sentences that are repetitive☺. Revise for clarity.
- Use transitional phrases and devices to connect ideas together between sentences and paragraphs.
- Stick to your topic. If it isn’t directly relevant cut it. (Design)
- Effective writing is specific and colorful. Consider your word choice and selection of supporting details. Is it the best choice? (Concreteness)
- Build energy in your writing by speaking sincerely about your topic and providing stimulating, thought-provoking information. (Energy)
- Be creative. Don’t follow a formula for every paper – hit the basics and then give it your own creative twist. This may come in the form of ideas, syntactical structures, or a surprising element. (Freshness)
- There should be no unnecessary interruptions or rough spots. Ideas should move smoothly and clearly from the opening paragraph to the conclusion. This comes from working and reworking your ideas many times. (Coherence)
- Effective writing is exact and correct. It is writing that attends to every detail, from the accuracy of the facts and details to the proper placement of quotation marks. (Correctness)
- Do NOT write “this shows” or “this proves” instead try suggests, seems, implies.
- Use the third person when writing. Do NOT use I, you, we, etc. This is an analysis based on a close reading, not your personal opinion of the work.
- Do NOT summarize the text. Do NOT repeat previously stated points unless you are building upon it or it is for a conclusion. Avoid redundancy.
- PROOFREAD and REVISE. I can not stress this enough. You do not want to face the disappointment of an AP English teacher if you confuse then/than in your paper. (Among many common usage errors that Ms. Avallone loathes to see.)

**Additional Notes based on discussion:**