

## WRITING A LITERARY ANALYSIS PAPER

## I. Reading strategies

- **Annotate!** While you're reading, take notes. These will guide you to generate ideas in the writing process. *Extract* information from the text rather than imposing your ideas, opinions, and reality on it.
- **Find a noting system** that you can easily follow: Post-It notes/flags, highlighting, writing on a separate paper. When the time comes to write your essay, your system will allow you to quickly differentiate your annotations to find evidence for your claim.
- **Pay close attention to the opening and closing** lines, paragraphs, and chapters. The text is organized that way for a reason, and whatever it says first and last are bound to be important.
- **Note repetitions** of, and patterns in, images, phrases, and ideas: those are the building blocks for the text's world. Try to put those pieces together to see what theories the text presents about the fundamental elements and ways of its world.

## II. Defining Argument

- **Thesis/Argument:** Your paper's goal is to identify a relationship between the literary aspects of the text and to discuss its greater thematic implications. It may help to break your claims into: (1) what the literary device is; (2) how it demonstrates your claim; and (3) so what if it does—what does the relationship show about the text as a whole? *Make sure you can adequately defend your entire claim within the length of your paper.*

**Example:** In Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, trees symbolize the resilience of nature and humanity, illustrated by the cherry choke tree scar on Sethe's back. This symbol, in turn, highlights the power of communal healing for overcoming profound individual traumas.

- **Know your audience:** Your assignment/professor should provide you with this information. Normally, it is someone who has read the text, which means you do not need to summarize the plot beyond relevant contextualization for evidence.
- **Evidence:** Evidence concerns who, what, and when: the facts. Quotes are the main form of evidence to prove your claim. Integrate quotes with context from text.
- **Analyzing evidence:** Analysis argues how and why your evidence supports your claim and explains your claim's implications for the text. Use it to connect your evidence first to the topic sentence of the paragraph and then to the thesis itself.

**Example:** Then, the focus shifts to the nighttime, when he says that, "with a lead pipe up my sleeve, a razor tucked in my boot [...] / I was born to make things right" (Smith 27-30). The poet uses the pipe as a symbol for violence, a kind of metaphorical darkness, as it can only inflict physical pain, revealing that the speaker can only achieve power through physical means.

### III. Determining Organization

- **Argument progression:** You can organize your paper by concepts/themes or by literary devices. Choose an organizational structure and stick with it. This helps you *avoid organizing by plot progression; follow the logic of your argument instead.*
- **Topic sentences:** These clearly explain the paragraph's argument, which should connect to the previous ideas to build toward your thesis' claim; their order should show a logical sequence of thought, which reflects the structure of your thesis/argument.
- **Quote integration:** For primary texts, situate the quote in its dramatic context. For secondary sources, name the critic and qualify your use of their argument. **Example of primary text:** After Janie realizes her unhappiness in her first marriage with Logan Killicks, she seeks consolation in her grandmother by sharing an image of her dream: "Ah wants things sweet wid mah marriage lak when you sit under a pear tree and think" (Hurston 23).  
**Example of secondary text:** Eleni Kefala, a poststructuralist, claims that Borges uses the short story "for its affinity with storytelling, its orality, and its narrative economy" (Kefala 219). However, she fails to note the influence of folklore on Borges' stories, which complicates her analysis of his use of genre.
- **Tense:** The text is always happening in its own right, so use **present tense** to refer to events that occur in a literary work. Use the **past tense** to refer to historical events that happen outside of the text.  
**Example of present tense:** Moby Dick bites off Ahab's leg.  
**Example of past tense:** Austen completed *Northanger Abbey* first of her six novels, but it was not published until after her death.

### IV. Citations

- When citing prose, follow the citation guidelines of your assignment. Be consistent!
- When citing poetry, also follow those guidelines, but refer to *line numbers* (instead of page numbers).

### V. Key Terms in Literature

- **Content vs. form:** Content is what the text actually says: the words on the page. Form is how the text employs style and structure to convey the content. When you analyze texts, discuss the relationship between form and content.
- **Narrator vs. speaker:** Narrator generally refers to the voice in prose. Speaker is the voice in poetry. Don't conflate the identity of the narrator or speaker with the author.
- **Point of view vs. perspective:** The point of view is the type of narrator who tells the story: first person, second person, and/or third person. The perspective concerns the narrator's or narrators' identity/identities and how that informs what the reader sees about the events which unfold.

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