

Writing A Literary Analysis

Any act of analysis, whether in the art and literary world, the science laboratory, or the corporate boardroom, means pulling apart the pieces of something (a book, an organism, a balance sheet) to see how they function, and most importantly, how they contribute to the purpose or meaning of the "something" as a whole. In a literary analysis, which describes your paper assignments for this literature class, the pieces might refer to numerous aspects: characters, symbols, settings, significant events, conflict, climax. All contribute to the work's overall meaning.

Like any good essay, a literary analysis cannot be squeezed into a rigid form. However, by tradition and reader expectations, this type of essay does have a certain number of elements to it. DO NOT follow this lecture slavishly, though you will want to include its basic parts in your paper; your first priority is to write a good essay, not to "fill in the blanks." But these elements are important to a thorough analysis. Also remember that you are not writing a book review as you might encounter in a paper or a magazine. These commercial reviews are intended to merely tell what happens in the movie in an entertaining fashion. This paper is an academic essay which analyses certain aspects of your text(s) and how they contribute to the film's meaning.

CONVENTIONS OF THE LITERARY ESSAY

The following lists the expected portions pertinent to the literary essay. *These may or may not be in separate paragraphs.* For example, the first 2 items might all show up in your introductory paragraph, while your later analytical paragraphs should comprise multiple body paragraphs. As you write them, you may assume that your audience has read your text, but will not have considered it in the perspective you're about to provide. However, your audience will still need reminders and cues for the references you make.

- **A VERY Brief Plot Summary:** A novel's plot often develops as follows: exposition sets the scene and introduces characters; characters are developed through telling action; conflict is introduced; the conflict is deepened through successive events; a climax is reached; the conflict is resolved. *Your plot summary should try to present this development in a capsule form, and should not extend past a paragraph.* It will also identify the novel and author almost immediately.
- **Presentation or hint of your thesis:** your thesis is the important and complex sentence in your paper. In your paper assignments, it needs to address one of the assignment's prompts in some way, but also provide your unique point of view on that prompt. Often it's best to present at least a rudimentary idea of your thesis near the beginning of the paper, but it should be quite clear by the end. A thesis is 1) a complete sentence; 2) not a question; 3) is focused and clear; and 4) provides a significant interpretation of the work. The rest of your paper will then discuss various examples of how the work supports your thesis, through analysis of various literary devices of your choosing.

- **Analysis of various literary devices:** much of the body of your paper will present examples from your chosen work that support your thesis. This is the "meat" of your paper and will comprise several paragraphs.
- **Many literary analyses need to include the most Climactic Scene:** Most novels build to one significant scene of resolution, whether it be the final battle between the "good guys and the bad guys," the reunion of estranged lovers, the reconciliation between characters in conflict, or perhaps the resolution of an inner conflict within a central character. Dealing with this at a later stage in your essay often solidifies your thesis in the strongest way. Be sure to connect this paragraph clearly to your thesis; otherwise it can feel "dropped in" and disconnected. In some cases, providing this scene is optional, especially if you're exploring some of the minor characters in the novel.
- **Conclusion:** A conclusion to this type of essay might revisit the larger meaning of the film, and universalize it further for the audience: what is this work saying about its strongest theme? What is significant or interesting about how it's said? Or does the work leave us with a sense of ambiguity, and what impact does that have on us as readers?/ What insights can we gain from the work?

STRUCTURE OF COMPARISON/CONTRAST PAPERS

Many of your prompts will ask you to compare and/or contrast two works. This means you'll be dealing with the similarities and/or differences between the two.

Organizing a paper like this is more complex than writing about one novel or film, as you need to move back and forth between multiple sources. Outlining the paper first might be helpful for you, and I strongly urge you to always use a point-by-point structure. A point-by-point structure is organized by the points you are using to compare/contrast the two works, and is NOT organized by the works themselves. So a simple point-by-point outline looks something like the simple outline below. Each roman numeral represents a section of the paper which might comprise several paragraphs:

Point-byPoint Outline of a Literary Analysis (what you should choose!)

Thesis topic: how evil is manifested in *Frankenstein* and *Dracula*

- I. The initial manifestation of evil
 - A. In *Frankenstein*, it is in the human main character's need to play God
 - B. In *Dracula*, it is in the non-human monster Dracula
- II. How evil develops in each source
 - A. In *Frankenstein*, evil becomes projected onto the monster
 - B. In *Dracula*, it becomes projected onto the humans as they are bitten
- III. How evil is vanquished

- A. In *Frankenstein*, the human main character begins to recognize his own responsibility for tragedy
- B. In *Dracula*, the evil remains centered on the monster; when he is destroyed, the humans are released from the "curse"

In contrast, here's the other approach many student writers gravitate towards, as it's easier to write (but harder to read):

The "Block" Outline of the Literary Analysis (which you should NOT choose)

Thesis topic: how evil is manifested in *Frankenstein* and *Dracula*

I. *Frankenstein*

- A. The initial manifestation of evil
- B. How evil develops in each source
- C. How evil is vanquished

II. *Dracula*

- A. The initial manifestation of evil
- B. How evil develops in each source
- C. How evil is vanquished

Do you see how the comparison/contrast gets lost in this kind of paper? It winds up being a summary of each work, and then is often followed by a very messy ending paragraph that tries to pull all the disparate threads together. Instead, use the point-by-point style so that your comparison/contrast is clear as you go.

STYLE OF THE LITERARY ANALYSIS

Finally, here are some grammatical/stylistic tips to keep in mind:

- Generally use present tense to narrate events and provide quotes. For example: "All the main characters of '*Salem's Lot* have to make a move from rationale disbelief to acceptance of the supernatural horror invading their town. For Matt Burke, it is when Mike Ryerson appears to him in his upstairs bedroom." If you do need to relate an event occurring before the present tense re-telling, of course move to past tense: "Up until this point, Matt Burke had played the role as skeptic in the group, fulfilling his responsibility as the scientific school-teacher." You also use present tense when reporting a statement by an author: "In his introduction to the anthology, *Frankenstein, Dracula and Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, Stephen King talks about the various ways evil manifests itself in these works. "
- Book and movie titles are italicized or underlined. Short stories (like other short works, such as essays, poems, or songs) are put in quotation marks.
- In the general structuring of your paper, it's best to stay with the chronology of the story. Of course you will skip over parts, but since your reader has read

the novel as well, it will be quite confusing if you jump around in the storyline. Be obvious with time transitions to assist your reader.