

HOW TO CARRY OUT THE LITERARY ANALYSIS ESSAY

Use the following templates and examples to help you in creating and developing your literary analysis essay. Keep these considerations in mind as you write.

Introduction

The purpose of the introduction is to introduce your thesis. You need to supply the necessary sentences in order to arrive at the particular interpretive position you will occupy in your essay. You should at all times consider what your reader needs to know. You can also use your introduction to introduce the short story, but this is a secondary consideration to introducing the thesis.

1. The Hook or Lede

You need to open your essay with a sentence or more to attract and engage the attention of your audience. This should be subtle in order to capture the audience's attention. Here are some options to consider:

- a. Describe a pivotal moment in the story that leads you toward your thesis. The ability to paint a picture with words is essential here. You can employ imagery and deft description to capture the moment contained therein. For example: "Mrs. Mallard, in Kate Chopin's short story, "Story of an Hour," suddenly had a vague feeling of relief and freedom as a consequence of her husband's death that she initially tried to resist but found herself wanting to embrace. Her heart raced and she felt a suppressed joy as she began to realize the consequences of the event."
- b. Provide a narration and description of an anecdote related to the short story. For example: "According to news accounts of the period, the child was last seen in a stroller and wearing a bonnet. The mother was distracted by the prominent images of the tabloids at the news counter. When she looked back down, the child was gone. As with this real instance of kidnapping, the story..."
- c. Use a significant and relevant quotation, but don't leave it hanging. Connect it to your discussion and be sure to introduce it as well as gloss it. For example: "Mark Twain once said, 'those of you inclined to worry have the widest selection in history.' His admonition against worrying is best exemplified in the short story..."
- d. Ask a compelling and quite likely rhetorical question. For example: "What would it be like to get news of the death of a beloved spouse, but after a short period of grief, one feels a sense of euphoria over the new life that awaits?"
- e. Provide an interesting fact or statistic related to the content of the short story. For example: "Estimates range as high as 3.5 million deaths in Indochina during the twenty years of war there involving the United States and its allies. In contrast, the US suffered 58,000 casualties."
- f. Look at a related instance. I wrote an essay a few years ago on a topic related to music, but in relating that topic, I used an anecdote from my experience where I

had visited the Philadelphia Museum of Art and looked at the paintings of Francesco Clemente, specifically his miniatures that involved the concept of the “palimpsest” or the erasure or elision of a work underneath and still ever slightly visible below the new work. Even though the museum visit and the artwork were not directly related to the topic of the essay, I made a connection and built my essay from it. The lesson here is to let your imaginations roam to find connections and novel syntheses wherever possible.

2. Explicit Meaning of the Short Story

At this point, your reader needs to have some basic understanding of the short story. Briefly explain what the story is about and be sure to identify the title of the story as well as the author. Remember that the titles of short stories are always punctuated with quotation marks.

3. Background Information

What else does your reader need to know before you get to your thesis? What question(s) emerge from the short story that leads you to your thesis? The problem you need to resolve at this point is how to fill the gap between covering the explicit meaning of the short story and the theme of the short story as elucidated in your thesis. Since the thesis is supposed to answer a challenging question, identify the question you will answer and how that question emerges from the reading of the story. For example: “How would a community of people interpret a spouse’s reaction to the death of her/his husband/wife if that reaction was not so much a deep and profound grief but instead a sense of euphoria from overcoming the chains of matrimony? What would their judgments of such a person be at that precise moment?”

4. Definitions of Key Terms

In a couple of essays I wrote, I used the concept of the “palimpsest” as a metaphor. That’s a term that required careful explanation and definition before further explanation.

5. The Thesis or Theme or Implicit Meaning of the Story

After supplying the necessary background leading to your thesis as well as the question that provokes it, your task at this point is to state your thesis, which also serves as the implicit meaning of the short story or the theme. For example: “Although readers might be initially perplexed by the reaction of Mrs. Mallard in the privacy of her room feeling a sense of euphoria and freedom after hearing of the death of her husband and after an initial strong feeling of grief, her reaction must be seen in the context of the status of women in the nineteenth century where women’s autonomy was highly restricted. Mrs. Mallard’s reaction then represents the yearning of such women in that era for freedom from the strictures of marital bonds.” Ask yourself as you write whether anyone could possibly disagree with your thesis and what this individual might say. In this instance, a different kind of thesis might be about Mrs. Mallard’s cold-bloodedness in the face of her

husband's demise and the sudden appearance of her husband and her own death as a kind of karmic comeuppance.

The Body

The categories of literary analysis are plot, character, setting, point of view, irony, tone, symbolism, and imagery. What you develop and to what degree depends very much on the short story you are analyzing and what you determine to be the theme of the story. Certain stories lend themselves to certain kinds of interpretation. Perhaps irony is a prominent element and needs to be explained in great detail, perhaps one or two paragraphs. Perhaps the setting of the story changes frequently over time and must be covered in an entire paragraph. For some stories, setting is easily dealt with and dispensed in less than one sentence. For example: "The story takes place in a large midwestern city in the middle of the last century, where..." What you choose to emphasize depends on how you intend to prove your thesis. Why do you say the theme of the story is such-and-such?

You should start the body with a transition linking it to the thesis and the introduction as a whole. Instead of using the formulaic transitions that you can find via a Google search, try inventing your own. For example: "This sense of paranoia is first apparent in the structure of the narrative." Another example: "Mrs. Mallard's unexpected feeling of euphoria is partially mitigated by her acknowledgement that grief would come again when she was able to see her husband's deceased body, which suggests the overarching depressed tone of the narrative." The repetition in the first instance is "paranoia," which in this instance cannot be easily substituted for another term. In the second, the repetition is about Mrs. Mallard and her sense of euphoria. Ideally, change the terms to synonyms if possible.

Your reader needs to know the basic storyline of the story at the start of the body. At this point, you can cover the more observational categories of interpretation: plot, character, and setting. You may decide, given the content of the story, to cover these in separate paragraphs if you have much to say about all of them. At all times when you apply this vocabulary to the story, consider what the reader needs to know. Do not discuss a character before introducing him or her. Otherwise, your essay will not be logical. Don't get into detail about plot before covering the location, time, season, and environment of the storyline. When covering the plot, do not summarize the plot at all. Your task is to apply the terms of plot to the story. First of all, cover the **exposition** of the storyline, the point in time and space where the story takes place. You can also identify whether the story has a **linear or non-linear** storyline. In other words, is it **chronological or a-chronological**? Then identify the **rising action**. You might also note an **inciting incident** if there is one. After the rising action, a **conflict** develops or perhaps **conflicts** leading to a possible **crisis**. The apex of the conflict is the **climax**. Then comes the **falling action**, and finally the **resolution**. In addition to these terms of plot, you may also note if appropriate any **flashbacks** or **foreshadowing** in the storyline. With regard to character, you should identify the major characters, including the protagonist and antagonist, as well as minor characters. You should also explain which characters are developed and

undeveloped, which do we know in three dimensions and which in two or only one dimension?

In addition, either in the plot analysis or in the introduction, be sure to address the narrative point of view of the story. Two general options cover the great bulk of the territory. Either the story is told from the **first person point of view** or it is told from the **third person point of view**. In the former case, the narrator is part of the story and takes part in many or some of the events. In this instance, the narrator most likely is **reliable**, i.e. trustworthy. However, there are some instances where narrators are **unreliable**, i.e. untrustworthy (usually insane). Examples of these can be found in works by Lawrence Sterne, Vladimir Nabokov, Edgar Allan Poe, and a number of other literary figures. Furthermore, in the case of the third person point of view, narrators can be **omniscient**, i.e. “godlike” or able to read the minds of the characters. In some instances, narrators are merely **limited omniscient**, i.e. able to read only the minds of the main characters. In still others, **objective** narration applies. In this case, the narrator is only able to describe what is apparent to the eye. The narrator is not able in this instance to read minds but can only make external description. In all forms of third person narration, the narrator is not part of the story, but rather outside of the actual narrated world, unlike first person narration.

At this point, the reader should have a reasonable grasp of the story, characters, setting and point of view. This should set the stage for the discussion that follows, which will now focus on the more interpretive categories rather than the observational ones in the first body paragraph. The rest is up to you and depends on the strategy you employ to prove your thesis. Should you cover imagery first? If so, you need to actually address the images that are apparent in the story. How are they described? What kind of descriptive language is employed?

What should come next? Perhaps symbol? In this instance, you identify things, people and places that have a larger significance in the overall meaning of the storyline. After that, you might consider the tone of the story. What is the attitude or manner of the story being presented? Then, perhaps you would consider irony. At which moments in the story does the narrative violate the reader’s expectations about what should happen, or where does the reader know more than the actual characters about events in the story? Perhaps the story cannot be read in terms of irony, or you are unable to see any particular moments as ironic, in which case you can omit it as a category of explanation.

Throughout the body, start your paragraphs with novel transitions like the example previously mentioned, rather than the more boring varieties you can find on the internet. Boring transitions, like boring writing in general, merit boring grades. Be sure to start all body paragraphs with strong and compelling topic sentences that specify the content to follow. Instead of writing, “the theme of the story can also be noted in regards to symbol,” remind the reader of the theme and specifically identify the symbols. Ask yourself when you write a topic sentence whether or not anyone could use the same topic sentence in any other paper. If so, then your topic sentence is not specific and unique enough. Your grade will reflect that as well.

Conclusion

Your target for the conclusion is at least four sentences. Six or even eight might be better though. Once again, you need a novel transition to lead into it. You can start by repeating something from the end of the previous paragraph or the main topic of that paragraph. The idea is to bring the reader back to the ultimate thematic point you are making in your essay.

Return to your thesis and restate it differently so as not to bore your audience with exact repetition. Then show the larger implications of the discussion. What does the reader know and understand now about the story that they may not have known before? What have you shown them? Sum up your insights and then close with some final memorable remarks. This will require some creativity, both in terms of interpretation and observation as well as in language use.

How Your Essay Will Be Evaluated

Affirmative responses to the following questions will be necessary:

1. Does your essay have a compelling thesis that can be both argued for and argued against? Does it respond to a pivotal question that the story is addressing? (When thinking of a thesis, please recognize that abstract concepts do not work. The implicit meaning should be precise as well as specific enough to the story.)
2. Did you carry out a plot analysis employing all the key terms of plot, character and setting identified here?
3. Did you attempt to read symbol, irony, tone, etc. in the story to some degree? While it is not necessary and perhaps not relevant to include all of these terms, at least a couple should be applied and in a convincing way to show that you understand the terms.
4. Have you attempted to deal with imagery in the story where strong description may have been employed?
5. Are you employing effective transitions at the start of every paragraph as well as throughout each paragraph to create cohesion and coherence?
6. Are your paragraphs unified under a singled topic, or do they drift in other tangents as well?
7. Do you have an effective, well-developed conclusion of around six sentences or perhaps a bit more?