

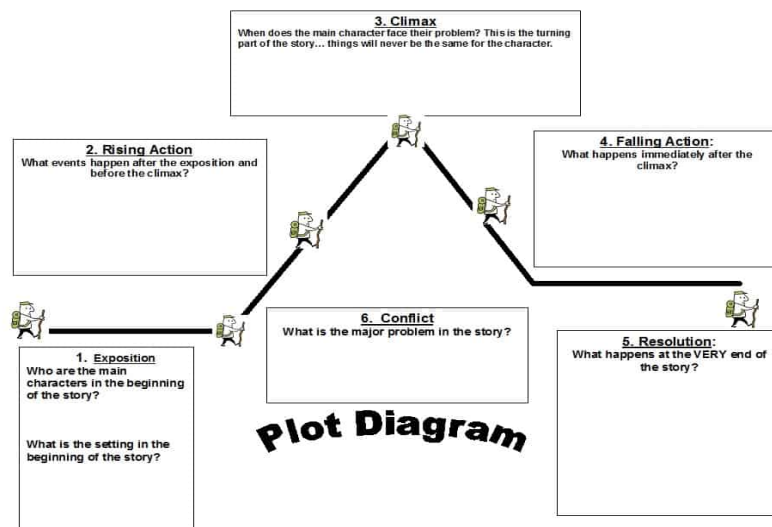
# LITERARY ANALYSIS ESSAY—NARRATIVE ANALYSIS

For the literary analysis essay, we will focus on a basic narrative analysis, rather than looking at more technical issues in literature, like psychoanalysis or social analysis. Thus, the literary analysis will involve employing and applying the formalist critical vocabulary with regard to stories, either short or of novel length.

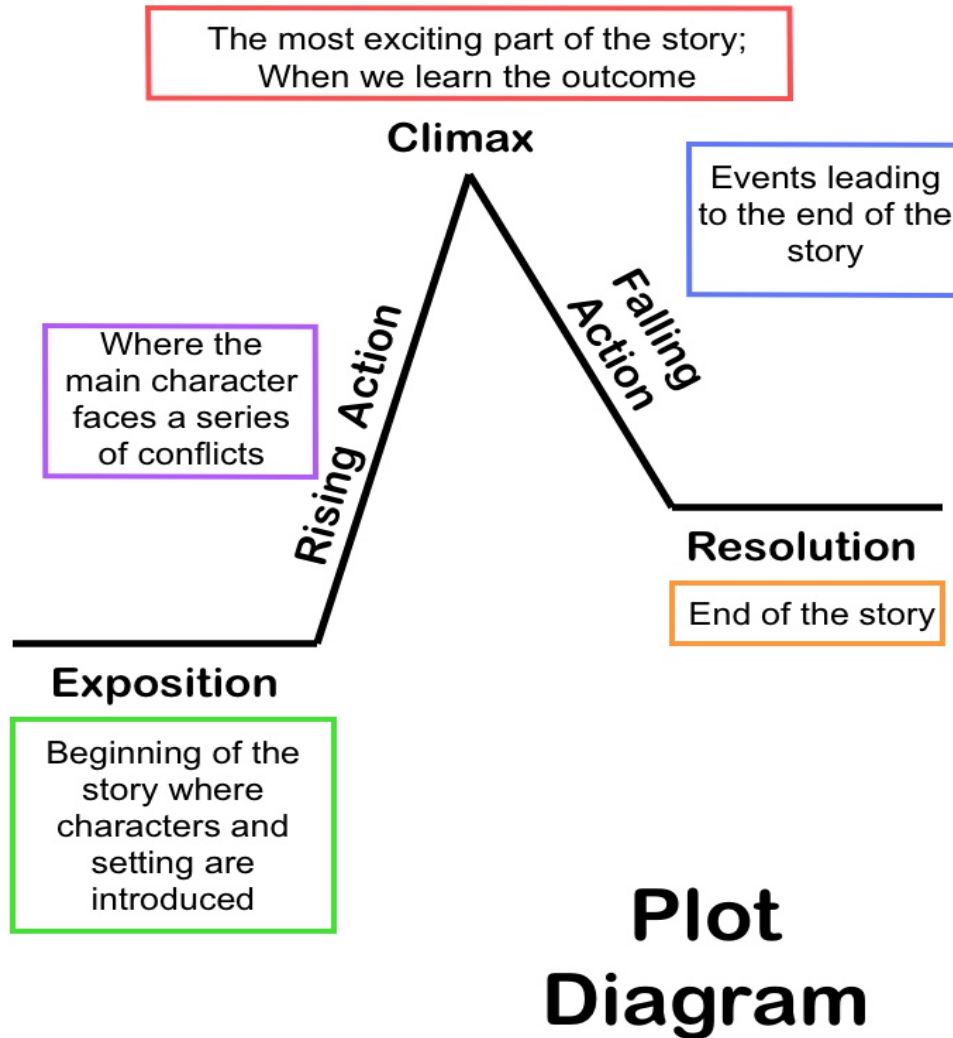
The key vocabulary of narrative analysis include:

1. Plot
2. Character
3. Setting
4. Point of View
5. Symbol
6. Style
7. Tone
8. Irony
9. Imagery
10. Theme

The first task in the body of the essay is to address the plot, character, setting and point of view of the story. We adhere to the following structure for plot: exposition, rising action, conflict, crisis, climax, falling action, and resolution/denouement. Setting, point of view, and character are covered in the exposition of the plot. You may follow the diagram below:



Or perhaps you prefer this one:



You should literally plot the vocabulary of plot to the story and identify the specific moments when each term is realized. First of all, what is the exposition of the story? Where and when does the story take place in space and time? What is the physical environment? Is it mountainous or urban? Is it a small village or a cavernous valley? Does it take place across several geographic locations? In addition, what is the social environment? How would you describe the space in terms of the economic class of the characters? What is their racial makeup, their educational background, etc.? Then, you should address the characters in the story. Who are the protagonist(s) and antagonist(s)? Who are the major and minor characters? Who are the developed and undeveloped characters? Which characters do you know in three dimensions? Which characters do you

know in only one or two? Which characters are mere shadows of real human beings? Which characters change and evolve over the course of the story; in other words, which characters are dynamic? Which characters remain the same; in other words, which characters are static? Potentially, it could take a few sentences to cover the exposition. Alternatively, it might take a few paragraphs to dispense with it, depending on what you have to say and how the narrative is constructed.

At some point early in the essay, you also need to address the point of view of the story. There are two types of point of view. First person point of view means that the narrator is a participant in the story, in other words, one of the characters. In addition, first person point of view can be either can come from either a **reliable** narrator or an **unreliable** narrator. A reliable narrator is one that is trustworthy, which is the case probably 95% of the time or more. An unreliable narrator is untrustworthy, either because the narrator is lying or because the narrator is insane, as in the case of Edgar Allan Poe's "Tell-Tale Heart." The other possibility is that the story is told from the third person point of view. In this instance, the narrator is not part of the story. Instead, the narrator comes from outside the story as either an **omniscient** narrator, or god-like, i.e. able to read the minds of the characters. The narrator could instead be **limited omniscient**, which means the narrator can only read the minds of the main characters. The third option is for the narrator to be **objective**, which means the narrator cannot read the minds of the characters, but instead only reports on what is visible to the narrator. The issue of point of view can probably be dispensed with in a sentence in the introduction or it might be added to the coverage of the exposition.

After covering the exposition, then identify the rising action of the story. You may note an "inciting incident" that takes place that drives the story forward. What is it, and how does it affect the plot? What is the conflict, and when does it emerge? How does the conflict turn into a crisis, and what kind of crisis is it? How does it impact the characters? Finally, when does the climax of the story take place, the apex of tension? What is the climax exactly, and what are the consequences of this event?

At this point, tension begins to descend. What takes place during the falling action of the story, and finally, how is the story resolved? How does it conclude?

You may use the following diagram to help you in preparing to discuss the plot:

Plot Diagram for \_\_\_\_\_

9. \_\_\_\_\_

8. \_\_\_\_\_

7. \_\_\_\_\_

6. \_\_\_\_\_

5. \_\_\_\_\_

4. \_\_\_\_\_

3. \_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_

1. \_\_\_\_\_

10. \_\_\_\_\_

11. \_\_\_\_\_

12. \_\_\_\_\_

13. \_\_\_\_\_

**Exposition**

Protagonist:

Antagonist:

Setting – Time:

Setting – Place:

Internal Conflict:

External Conflict:

Author's Theme:

Symbolism:

Foreshadowing:

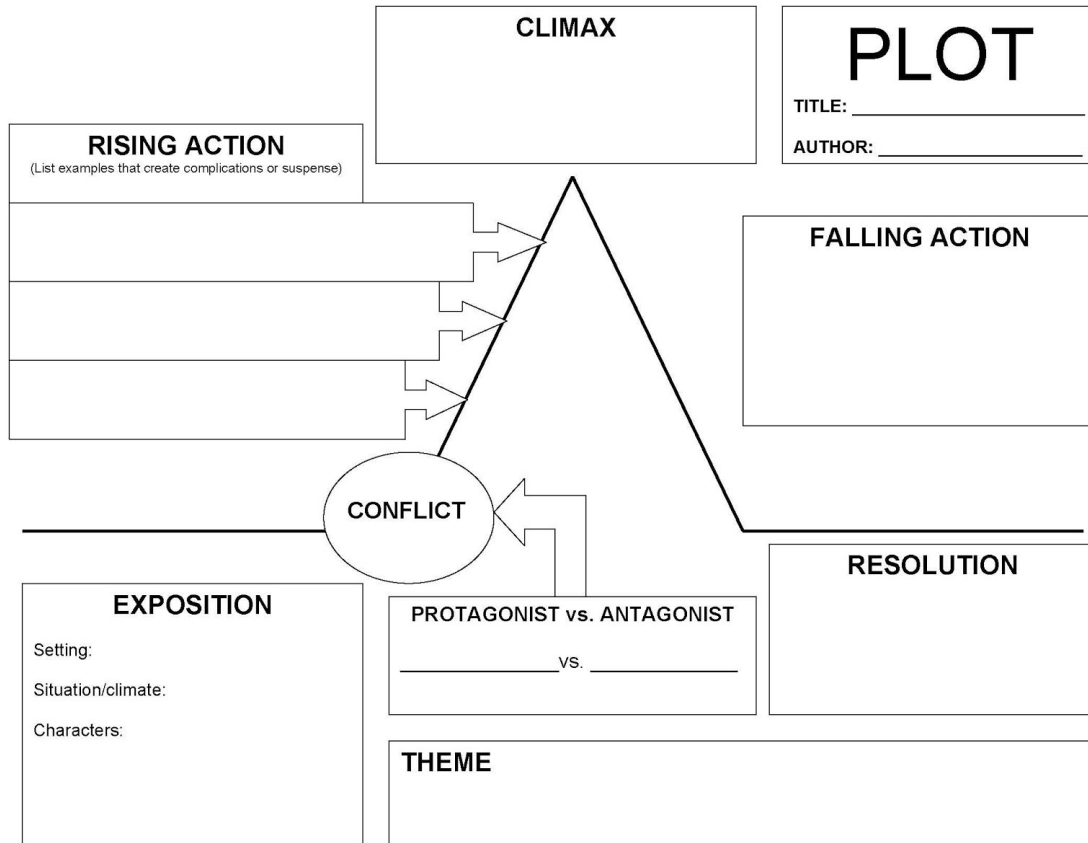
Irony:

**Climax:**

**Resolution:**

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Or you could use this one instead or in addition:



After examining the plot, then the choice of what to interpret depends on you and what the story reveals, what elements are emphasized. The first consideration is symbol. Is there an object, a person, or an action that has some kind of greater significance, like an abstract concept? Perhaps there are several symbols in the story. Perhaps it might take as many as a few paragraphs to fully expound on the most significant ones. Perhaps you might accomplish the task in as little as one paragraph. Colors generally have symbolic value. Do any particular ones stand out? You may do a bit of background research on the significance and potential meanings of colors to determine how to interpret the ones that appear in the story. Which meanings seem most applicable in the context of the story?

In addition, you can consider the style of the story. Is it tightly and rapidly paced or is it slower and more deliberate? What is apparent to the reader, and what is hidden? What does the story disclose, and what does it conceal? What is the mood or tone of the story? Is it optimistic, joyful, depressing, sedate, tragic, or enervating? What feeling do you get from reading it?

Along with style, you can consider how the issue of irony appears in the story. Irony occurs when actions do not seem to match the intentions of characters or when viewers' predictions are violated. One prominent kind of irony is a twist in the plot of the story that typically occurs at the end. This is called **situational irony**. Another type is called **dramatic irony**, when the reader knows something that the character(s) do not. Once

again, the topic of irony might be addressed in a moderately developed paragraph, or there might be several issues to attend to, requiring several paragraphs of explanation.

Imagery refers to the kind of pictures that emerge in the story due to significant description. What kinds of images stand out in the story, and how do they serve to support your take on the implicit meaning of the story? For imagery, careful descriptive detail is important. You want to be able to paint a picture with words so that your audience can see the image with their minds as they read. To do a good job on imagery in your essay then you want to present a great deal of description where the reader can get a sense of what you have been able to visualize in the story.

Finally, address the theme of the story in your thesis. For the theme, you should consider the main point being made in the story. For theme, try to think of what the story is implying or suggesting about its events and characters. Your sense of the theme should be what you think the story is trying to actually say. There may be some divergence among readers of the story about what the theme might be. What is important is not that everyone has the same interpretation, but rather that every compelling construction of the theme be based on evidence from the story, that one be capable of justifying it. Be careful not to confuse the explicit meaning of the story, what the story is about, as its theme. The explicit meaning is more general and is not contestable, i.e. no one will likely disagree with it. Rather, your sense of the theme of the story should be such that other readers of the story might disagree with you. Try to consider what potential readers might say if they did disagree with you. If you cannot imagine such disagreement, you might not have a strong thesis.

Along with the plot analysis, you can also address any **flashbacks** or **foreshadowing** in the story. Are there any breaks in the narrative where the story flashes back to an earlier period of time in the story, or are there any moments where the story hints at events that come later in the narrative?