

# HOW TO WRITE A LITERARY ANALYSIS ESSAY

The purpose of a literary analysis essay is to carefully examine and sometimes evaluate a work of literature or an aspect of a work of literature. As with any analysis, this requires you to break the subject down into its component parts. Examining the different elements of a piece of literature is not an end in itself but rather a process to help you better appreciate and understand the work of literature as a whole. For instance, an analysis of a poem might deal with the different types of images in a poem or with the relationship between the form and content of the work. If you were to analyze (discuss and explain) a play, you might analyze the relationship between a subplot and the main plot, or you might analyze the character flaw of the tragic hero by tracing how it is revealed through the acts of the play. Analyzing a short story might include identifying a particular theme (like the difficulty of making the transition from adolescence to adulthood) and showing how the writer suggests that theme through the point of view from which the story is told; or you might also explain how the main character's attitude toward women is revealed through his dialogue and/or actions.

**REMEMBER:** Writing is the sharpened, focused expression of thought and study. As you develop your writing skills, you will also improve your perceptions and increase your critical abilities. Writing ultimately boils down to the development of an idea. Your objective in writing a literary analysis essay is to convince the person reading your essay that you have supported the idea you are developing. **Unlike ordinary conversation and classroom discussion, writing must stick with great determination to the specific point of development.** This kind of writing demands tight organization and control. Therefore, your essay must have a **central idea (thesis)**, it must have **several paragraphs** that grow systematically out of the central idea, and **everything in it must be directly related to the central idea and must contribute to the reader's understanding of that central idea.** These three principles are listed again below:

1. **Your essay must cover the topic you are writing about.**
2. **Your essay must have a central idea (stated in your thesis) that governs its development.**
3. **Your essay must be organized so that every part contributes something to the reader's understanding of the central idea.**

## THE ELEMENTS OF A SOLID ESSAY

### The Thesis Statement

The thesis statement tells your reader what to expect: it is a restricted, precisely worded declarative sentence that states the purpose of your essay -- the point you are trying to make. **Without a carefully conceived thesis, an essay has no chance of success.** The following are thesis statements which would work for a 500-750 word literary analysis essay:

Gwendolyn Brooks's 1960 poem "The Ballad of Rudolph Reed" demonstrates how the poet uses the conventional poetic form of the ballad to treat the unconventional poetic subject of racial intolerance.

The fate of the main characters in *Antigone* illustrates the danger of excessive pride.

The imagery in Dylan Thomas's poem "Fern Hill" reveals the ambiguity of humans' relationship with nature.

**Typically, the thesis statement falls at the end of your introductory paragraph.**

## The Introduction

The introduction to your literary analysis essay should try to capture your reader's interest. To bring immediate focus to your subject, you may want to use a quotation, a provocative question, a brief anecdote, a startling statement, or a combination of these. You may also want to include background information relevant to your thesis and necessary for the reader to understand the position you are taking. ***In addition, you need to include the title of the work of literature and name of the author.*** The following are satisfactory introductory paragraphs which include appropriate thesis statements:

- A.** What would one expect to be the personality of a man who has his wife sent away to a convent (or perhaps has had her murdered) because she took too much pleasure in the sunset and in a compliment paid to her by another man? It is just such a man—a Renaissance duke—who Robert Browning portrays in his poem “My Last Duchess.” A character analysis of the Duke reveals that through his internal dialogue, his interpretation of earlier incidents, and his actions, his traits—arrogance, jealousy, and greediness—emerge.
- B.** The first paragraph of Alberto Alvaro Rios’s short story “The Secret Lion” presents a twelve-year-old boy’s view of growing up—everything changes. As the narrator informs the reader, when the magician pulls a tablecloth out from under a pile of dishes, children are amazed at the “stay-the-same part,” while adults focus only on the tablecloth itself (42). Adults have the benefit of experience and know the trick will work as long as the technique is correct. When people “grow up,” they gain this experience and knowledge but lose their innocence and sense of wonder. In other words, the price paid for growing up is a permanent sense of loss. This tradeoff is central to “The Secret Lion.” The key symbols in the story reinforce its main theme: change is inevitable and always accompanied by a sense of loss.
- C.** The setting of John Updike’s story “A & P” is crucial to the reader’s understanding of Sammy’s decision to quit his job. Even though Sammy knows that his quitting will make life more difficult for him, he instinctively insists upon rejecting what the A & P represents in the story. When he rings up a “No Sale” and “saunter[s]” out of the store, Sammy leaves behind not only a job but the rigid state of mind associated with the A & P. Although Sammy is the central character in the story, Updike seems to invest as much effort in describing the setting as he does Sammy. The title, after all, is not “Youthful Rebellion” or “Sammy Quits” but “A & P.” The setting is the antagonist of the story and plays a role that is as important as Sammy’s.

## The Body of the Essay and the Importance of Topic Sentences

The term regularly used for the development of the central idea of a literary analysis essay is the **body**. In this section you present the paragraphs (**at least 3 paragraphs for a 500-750 word essay**) that support your thesis statement. Good literary analysis essays contain an explanation of your ideas and evidence from the text (short story, poem, play) that supports those ideas. **Textual evidence** consists of **summary, paraphrase, specific details, and direct quotations**.

Each paragraph should contain a **topic sentence** (usually the first sentence of the paragraph) which states one of the topics associated with your thesis, combined with some assertion about how the topic will support the central idea. The purpose of the topic sentence is twofold:

1. To relate the details of the paragraph to your thesis statement.
2. To tie the details of the paragraph together.

The substance of each of your **developmental paragraphs** (the body of your essay) will be the explanations, summaries, paraphrases, specific details, and direct quotations you need to support and develop the more general statement you have made in your topic sentence. The following is the first developmental paragraph after one of the introductory paragraphs (C) above:

### **TOPIC SENTENCE**

Sammy's descriptions of the A & P present a setting that is ugly, monotonous, and rigidly regulated. The chain store is a common fixture in modern society, so the reader can identify with the uniformity Sammy describes. The fluorescent light is as blandly cool as the "checkerboard green-and-cream rubber tile floor" (486). The "usual traffic in the store moves in one direction (except for the swim suited girls, who move against it), and everything is neatly organized and categorized in tidy aisles. The dehumanizing routine of this environment is suggested by Sammy's offhand references to the typical shoppers as "sheep," "house slaves," and "pigs" (486). These regular customers seem to walk through the store in a stupor; as Sammy indicates, not even dynamite could move them out of their routine (485).

### **EXPLANATIONS AND TEXTUAL EVIDENCE**

This paragraph is a strong one because it is developed through the use of quotations, summary, details, and explanation to support the topic sentence. **Notice how it relates back to the thesis statement.**

## The Conclusion

Your literary analysis essay should have a concluding paragraph that gives your essay a sense of completeness and lets your readers know that they have come to the end of your paper. Your concluding paragraph might restate the thesis in different words, summarize the main points you have made, or make a relevant comment about the literary work you are analyzing, but from a different perspective. **Do not introduce a new topic in your conclusion.** Below is the concluding paragraph from the essay already quoted above (A) about Browning's poem "My Last Duchess":

If the Duke has any redeeming qualities, they fail to appear in the poem. Browning's emphasis on the Duke's traits of arrogance, jealousy, and materialism make it apparent that anyone who might have known the Duke personally would have based his opinion of him on these three personality "flaws." Ultimately, the reader's opinion of the Duke is not a favorable one, and it is clear that Browning intended that the reader feel this way.

## The Title of Your Essay

It is essential that you give your essay a title that is descriptive of the approach you are taking in your paper. Just as you did in your introductory paragraph, try to get the reader's attention. **Using only the title of the literary work you are examining is unsatisfactory.** The titles that follow are appropriate for the papers (A, B, C) discussed above:

Robert Browning's Duke: A Portrayal of a Sinister Man  
The A & P as a State of Mind  
Theme in "The Secret Lion": The Struggle of Adolescence

## Audience

Consider the reader for whom you are writing your essay. Imagine you are writing for not only your professor but also the other students in your class who have about as much education as you do. They have read the assigned work just as you have, but perhaps they have not thought about it in exactly the same way. In other words, **it is not necessary to "retell" the work of literature in any way.** Rather, it is your role to be the explainer or interpreter of the work—to tell what certain elements of the work mean in relation to your **central idea (thesis)**. When you make references to the text of the short story, poem, or play, you are doing so to remind your audience of something they already know. **The principle emphasis of your essay is to draw conclusions and develop arguments. Be sure to avoid plot summary.**

## USING TEXTUAL EVIDENCE

The skillful use of textual evidence -- **summary, paraphrase, specific detail, and direct quotations** -- can illustrate and support the ideas you are developing in your essay. However, textual evidence should be used judiciously and only when it directly relates to your topic. The correct and effective use of textual evidence is vital to the successful literary analysis essay.

### Summary

If a key event or series of events in the literary work support a point you are trying to make, you may want to include a **brief summary**, making sure that you show the relevance of the event or events by explicitly connecting your summary to your point. Below is an effective summary (with its relevance clearly pointed out) from the essay already quoted above on "The Secret Lion" (**B**):

The boys find the grinding ball, but later attempt to bury it (**SUMMARY**). Burying it is their futile attempt to make time stand still and to preserve perfection (**RELEVANCE**).

### Paraphrase

You can make use of paraphrase when you need the details of the original, but not necessarily the words of the original: paraphrase to put someone else's words into your own words. Below is an example (also from the paper on "The Secret Lion") of how to "translate" original material into part of your own paper:

**Original:** "I was twelve and in junior high school and something happened that we didn't have a name for, but it was nonetheless like a lion, and roaring, roaring that way the biggest things do."

**Paraphrase:** Early in the story, the narrator tells us that when he turned twelve and started junior high school, life changed in a significant way that he and his friends could not quite name or identify.

### Specific Detail

Various types of details from the text lend **concrete** support to the development of the central idea of your literary analysis essay. These details add credibility to the point you are developing. Below is a list of some of the details which could have been used in the developmental paragraph from the paper on John Updike's short story "A & P" (**see the paragraph again for which details were used and how they were used**).

"usual traffic"  
"fluorescent lights"  
"checkerboard green-and-cream rubber-tile floor"  
"electric eye"  
shoppers like "sheep," "house slaves," and "pigs"  
neatly stacked food  
dynamite

## Using Direct Quotations

Quotations can illuminate and support the ideas you are trying to develop. A judicious use of quoted material will make your points clearer and more convincing. **As with all the textual evidence you use, make sure you explain how the evidence is relevant—let the reader know why the quotes you cite are significant to your argument.** Below are guidelines and examples that should help you effectively use quotations:

1. Brief quotations (four lines or fewer of prose and three lines or fewer of poetry) should be carefully introduced and integrated into the text of your paper. Put quotation marks around all briefly quoted material.

### **Prose example:**

As the "manager" of the A & P, Lengel is both the guardian and enforcer of "policy" (487). When he gives the girls "that sad Sunday-school-superintendent stare," the reader becomes aware of Lengel's character as the A & P's version of a dreary bureaucrat who "doesn't miss much" (487). **Make sure you give page numbers when necessary. Notice that in this example the page numbers are in parenthesis after the quotation marks but before the period.**

### **Poetry example:**

From the beginning, the Duke in Browning's poem gives the reader a sense of how possessive he really is: "That's my last Duchess on the wall, / Looking as if she were alive" (1-2). The reader cannot help but notice how, even though the Duke is talking about her portrait, his main concern is that she belongs to him. **Notice that line # 1 is separated from line # 2 by a slash. Make sure you give the line numbers when necessary.**

2. Lengthy quotations should be separated from the text of your paper. More than **four lines of prose** should be double spaced and indented **ten spaces** from the left margin, with the right margin the same as the rest of your paper. More than **three lines of poetry** should be double spaced and **centered** on the page. **Note: do not use quotation marks to set off these longer passages because the indentation itself indicates that the material is quoted.**

### **Prose example:**

The first paragraph of "The Secret Lion" introduces the narrator as someone who has just entered adolescence and is uncertain what to make of it:

I was twelve and in junior high school and something happened that we didn't have a name for, but it was there nonetheless like a lion, and roaring, roaring that way the biggest things do. Everything changed. Just that. Like the rug, the one that gets pulled -- or better, like the tablecloth those magicians pull where the stuff on the table stays the same but the gasp! from the audience makes the staying-the-same part not matter. Like that. (41-42) **Make sure you give page numbers when necessary. Notice in this example that the page numbers are in parenthesis after the period of the last sentence.**

### Poetry example:

The Duke seems to object to the fact that his "last Duchess" is not discriminating enough about bestowing her affection. In the following lines, the Duke lists examples of this "fault":

Sir, 'twas all one! My favor at her breast,  
The dropping of the daylight in the west,  
The bough of cherries some officious fool  
Broke in the orchard for her, the white mule  
She rode with round the terrace -- all and each  
Would draw from her alike the approving speech.  
(Browning 25-30)

**Be sure to provide the line numbers.**

3. If any words are added to a quotation in order to explain who or what the quotation refers to, you must use **brackets** to distinguish your addition from the original source.

#### Example:

The literary critic John Strauss asserts that "he [Young Goodman Brown] is portrayed as self-righteous and disillusioned" (10). **Brackets are used here because there is no way of knowing who "he" is unless you add that information.**

**Brackets** are also used to change the grammatical structure of a quotation so that it fits into your sentence.

#### Example:

Strauss also argues that Hawthorne "present[s] Young Goodman Brown in an ambivalent light" (10). **Brackets are used here to add the "s" to the verb "present" because otherwise the sentence would not be grammatically correct.**

4. You must use **ellipsis** if you omit any words from the original source you are quoting. **Ellipsis** can be used at the beginning, in the middle, or at the end of the quotation, depending on where the missing words were originally. **Ellipsis is formed by either three or four periods with a space between each period.**

Original: "Early to bed and early to rise makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise."

#### Example (omission from beginning):

This behavior ". . . makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise." **Ellipsis formed by three dots after the quotation marks.**

**Example (omission from middle):**

This maxim claims that "Early to bed . . . makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise." ***Ellipsis formed by three dots used in place of the words "and early to rise."***

**Example (omission from end):**

He said, "Early to bed and early to rise makes a man healthy . . . ." ***Ellipsis is formed by four dots before the quotation marks -- the fourth dot is really a period which ends the sentence.***

5. Use a single line of ***spaced periods*** to indicate the omission of an entire line of poetry.

**Example:**

The Duke seems to object to the fact that his "last Duchess" is not discriminating enough about bestowing her affection:

She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.

.....

The dropping of the daylight in the west,  
The bough of cherries some officious fool  
Broke in the orchard for her, while the white mule  
She rode around the terrace -- like and each  
Would draw from her alike the approving speech....  
(Browning 24-30)

## **Punctuating Direct Quotations**

You will be able to punctuate quoted materials accurately if you observe the following conventions used in writing about literature:

1. When the quoted material is part of your own sentence, place **periods and commas** inside the quotation marks.

### **Example:**

According to the narrator of "The Secret Lion," change was "like a lion," meaning that its onset is sudden and ferocious. **The comma is inside the quotation marks.**

2. When the quoted material is part of your own sentence, but you need to include a parenthetical reference to page or line numbers, place the **periods and commas** after the reference.

### **Example:**

The narrator of "The Secret Lion" says that the change was "like a lion" (Rios 41). **The period is outside the quotation marks, after the parenthetical reference.**

3. When the quoted material is part of your own sentence, punctuation marks other than periods and commas, such as question marks, are placed outside the quotation marks, unless they are part of the quoted material.

### **Example (not part of original):**

Why does the narrator of "The Secret Lion" say that the change was "like a lion"? **The question mark is placed after the quotation marks because it does not appear in the original -- it ends a question being asked about the story.**

### **Example (part of original):**

The Duke shows his indignation that the Duchess could like everyone and everything when he says, "Sir, 'twas all one!" (Browning 25). **The exclamation point is placed inside the quotation marks because it appears in the original.**

4. When the original material you are quoting already has quotation marks (for instance, dialog from a short story), you must use single quotation marks within the double quotation marks.

### **Example:**

Lengel tries to stop Sammy from quitting by saying, "“Sammy, you don't want to do this to your Mom and Dad”" (Updike 486).

