

# LITERARY ANALYSIS

Ernest Hemingway once said, “*I always try to write on the principle of the iceberg. There is seven-eighths of it under water for every part that shows.*” Like Hemingway, good writers try to get ideas across to their readers, but they do not want to be so obvious about the meaning of their work that readers do not “learn” something. When readers closely examine and draw conclusions about the meaning of a piece of literature, they are “analyzing” the work.

The goal in a literary analysis is to share a clear and convincing interpretation of a literary work or some portion of it. The **analysis may concern the overall meaning of the work, or involve a certain aspect such as character, setting, narrative, dialogue, plot, symbolism, etc.** When deciding what to tackle in analyzing a literary work, consider some of the following questions:

*What is the point the author is trying to get across?*

*Is the author trying to tell us something about ourselves, our lives, our values, our relationships, etc.?*

*How do the characters help to get the author’s point across?*

*Is there an overriding conflict between characters, and why is that important?*

*How does the setting fit into the story and its meaning?*

*Why is the narrative written the way it is, and how does that relate to the story’s meaning?*

*Why did the author choose these words? What do they suggest – what is their connotation?*

*How does the plot help the reader understand the story and its deeper meanings?*

*How and why does the author use symbolism in the story?*

A literary analysis will **require** a “close” (detailed, careful) reading of the work. A perfunctory, one-time reading will not be sufficient. Literary analysis includes analysis (examining and/or breaking down), interpretation (explaining or defining), and evaluation (assessing and judging). Third person point of view and present tense are standard in literary writing. Make your points, but avoid using pronouns such as “I”, “my”, “we”, “us”, “our” or “you.”

Like any composition, a literary analysis will have an introduction, separate body paragraphs (there can be—and often need to be – more than three), and a conclusion. If any of these elements is missing, your essay is incomplete. Indent each of your paragraphs to help the reader follow the essay structure. The order of your paragraphs will help the reader follow the logical flow of your points. Remember, **writing requires revision; create an initial draft and then revise for clarity, coherence, accuracy, and completeness.**

## INTRODUCTION

Your analysis should include the following:

1. *Statement of topic:* Be sure to **name the work and its author** early in the paper.
2. *Statement of interest:* Explain the **aspect of the work that interests you.**
3. *Statement of Thesis:* Describe the **main point or issue your paper will illustrate or explain.** Give a clear statement, preferably in one sentence.

## **BODY**

When writing an analysis essay, all the elements of the essay (introduction, body paragraphs and conclusion) should combine to support the main point your paper will illustrate or explain. **Do not simply summarize the work.** It is your task to make a point about the work and discuss it. All paragraphs, sections, etc. must support the thesis. Try the following approach:

### **DO**

1. **Summarize** the point you wish to make concerning the meaning of the work. (Do not use a quote, paraphrase, or scene as your point.)
2. Use a **quote, paraphrase, or scene to backup** or illustrate **your point**.
3. **Interpret and discuss** the quote, paraphrase, or scene in relation to your point.

**NOTE:** In a researched analysis, cite important critics who support your thesis and answer any critics who argue against your thesis.

4. Focus on the **form** – the elements the writer uses to develop meaning in the work.

A simple acronym to help you remember this process is SQIF: **S**ummarize, **Q**uote, **I**nterpret, discuss **F**orm (Winkler 298).

### **DO NOT**

1. Attempt to retell the work.
2. Leave out your thesis; the thesis tells the reader the point you will be proving in your paper.
3. Pad your writing with long, unnecessary quotes.
4. Quote without interpreting.
5. Quote without including an internal (parenthetical or in-text) citation for each quote.
6. End or begin a body paragraph with a quote; quotes should be introduced and analyzed.
7. Shift your discussion from the work itself. Avoid frequent references to the author in the body; focus on the work.

Consider the following sentences excerpted from two different analyses. (Both excerpts were originally written as single, cohesive paragraphs in a complete analysis of the individual works. Note that the analysis focuses on the work, not the author or the reader.)

*A discussion of the symbolic use of the caged bird in Paul Laurence Dunbar's poem, "Sympathy" (McAllister 137).*

**Point:** The bird, like the African-American people, was held captive but was inspired by the longing to be free. In his attempt to be free, the bird fought and mutilated himself to no avail. Similar to the bird, the African-Americans fought to escape the cruelty of being caged in by racism. The people shed blood to be released from the captivity of their symbolic cages.

**Quote:** In his quest for freedom, the bird "beat his wing / Till its blood is red on the cruel bars" (lines 8-9).

**Interpretation:** Likewise, the people were distraught to find their struggles in vain and their wings useless; the bars on injustice were too confining. Finally, with bruised wings and throbbing hearts, the people continued to beat their "cages" in a seemingly useless attempt to gain freedom. After the endless struggle, they could only plead and pray because their hearts were too heavy to do much more.

*A discussion of Walt Whitman's eulogy to Abraham Lincoln "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," written as Lincoln's funeral train passes by (Buscemi, Nicolae, and Strugala 232).*

- Point:** Lincoln's persona is represented not only by the *star*, but also by the *bird* and his *song*.
- Quote:** Whitman writes: "In the swamp in secluded recesses, / A shy and hidden bird is warbling a song. / Solitary the thrush...Sings by himself a song (lines 18-22).
- Interpretation:** This bird is Lincoln, as his life pours out in song, passing through the fields, swamps, and woods by train on route to his home in Illinois.

## **CONCLUSION**

The conclusion should restate or re-emphasize your thesis and bring your analysis to a convincing close. Strive to leave your reader feeling satisfied that you knew the material, discussed it fairly, and argued your thesis convincingly.

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Buscemi, Santi V., Albert H. Nicolai, and Richard Strugala. The Basics: A Rhetoric Handbook. 3rd ed. Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2000.

McAllister, Zahra. "Why the Caged Bird Sings." The Polishing Cloth. 7th ed. Ed. Hank Eidson, Tamara Shue, and Ted Wadley. Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt, 1998. 137-38.

Winkler, Anthony C., and Jo Ray McCuen. Rhetoric Made Plain. 2nd ed. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978.