



## Academic Writing Guide: How to Write a Literary Analysis

### What is a Literary Analysis?

A literary analysis is a **critical analysis** of a work of literature such as a poem, play, short story, or novel. A literary analysis starts with careful reading and examination of certain components of the story to understand it.

The analysis may focus on literary elements such as setting, character, plot, and theme. It may also focus on literary devices such as foreshadowing, point of view, irony, metaphor, and symbolism. Your analysis will discuss why the elements and devices you choose to discuss are significant to the story and its message.

### Organizing Your Literary Analysis

A literary analysis can be organized like a standard essay, with an introduction, body paragraphs, and conclusion. Your essay requires an argument to drive the writing forward. More specifically, “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**” (Bucks Community College).

### The Introduction

In your introductory paragraph, you’re moving from general (background information) to specific (thesis statement). Make sure that your introduction includes these elements:

#### The Hook

This is an introductory sentence that catches your reader’s interest. A hook can be a **short** fact, quote, or question that relates to your paper’s topic.

#### Background Information/Introduce the Topic

Introduce your topic, issue, or argument and state **the name of the author** and **the title of the work** you are going to discuss. Then, briefly give some background information on the story and/or the author to explain how your topic of analysis is important or interesting. The information **should not be too detailed**; consider the information and context your audience needs to understand your paper.

**Example**

Markus Zusak's novel *The Book Thief* is set in Nazi Germany and follows Liesel, an illiterate girl, as she settles into her new life with her foster family.

**Thesis Statement**

This comes at the end of the introduction. A thesis statement should be:

- **Direct:** It tells the reader exactly what your paper is about.
- **Limited in scope:** It should be specific enough to be explained within a single paper.
- **Arguable:** People should be able to agree or disagree with your position.
- **Supportable:** There should be evidence to support your position.

Your thesis statement should **not** be a fact or observation about the story.

**Example**

Markus Zusak's use of the personification of Death as the narrator in *The Book Thief* effectively emphasizes Liesel and Max's characterization by highlighting both their humanity and agency.

**The Body (Body Paragraphs)**

Each paragraph in the body will focus on a different idea, but each of these ideas must support your thesis statement.

Start each paragraph with a topic sentence that explains what element or device you are going to discuss and the point you are making about it. Each paragraph should contain examples and relevant quotes that support your analysis or argument. These examples should **support** your analysis, not act as your analysis, so avoid listing examples and quotations.

If you use ideas (direct quotations or paraphrases) from sources outside of the piece you are analyzing, **you must cite them**. Give others credit for their work! Doing so will help you avoid plagiarism.

Explain a specific part of the story and then provide your interpretation **and** analysis of why those parts contribute to the greater meaning or theme of the story. Avoid summarizing the story. Your instructor already knows the contents of the story, so this is your opportunity to demonstrate your understanding of it!

**Example**

Liesel shows her agency by stealing a book.

This is a good claim, but it isn't very strong.

**Example**

Even though Liesel understands the consequences of stealing a book, especially one deemed unfit by the Nazi regime, she does it anyways. Death narrates, "Beneath [Liesel's] shirt, a book was eating her up" (Zusak 184). Liesel's actions demonstrate her

agency because she is actively pursuing her desire to learn how to read. In doing so, she also shows that her desire is greater than her fear of the regime.

This example is much better because it engages with specific evidence and explains how the evidence supports the argument.

In your interpretation, try to point out specific aspects from the original text or scene. For example, what is the specific language used to describe the character's action, dialogue, etc.? Does it reveal something that could be used as further support for your argument? Does it connect to any literary devices or figurative language? Noticing and pointing out details will help you make a stronger argument!

### **Example**

Death's narration of the book "eating her up" (184) is also literal and symbolic. The burning book "eating her up" is literally searing her skin and symbolically consuming her thoughts.

## **The Conclusion**

In the concluding paragraph, your flow will be the opposite of the introduction—you are moving from specific (restated thesis) to general (broader commentary).

- Begin your conclusion with a restatement of your thesis in different words.
- Summarize the main ideas from your body paragraphs and explain why your analysis is significant to the broader subject/story.
- **Do not** introduce any new topics, analysis, or quotations. Only focus on what you have already discussed and established in your paper.

**This handout was put together with help from:**

[Bucks County Community College](#) and [Purdue University](#)

**For additional help, please make an appointment with a WLC Academic Writing Specialist at:**



<https://alexander.mywconline.com/>