

Literary Analysis

Analyzing literature is what happens *after* you have gained a basic understanding of what a work of literature is generally about. It occurs when you move beyond literal summary to examine closely the parts of the whole—the specific literary elements within the work that contribute to the effect of the work in its entirety. Good analysis deepens your understanding and appreciation of a literary work and the craft of the artist.

Analysis, by its very nature, cannot be just about identification. Simply to point out that a literary device exists within the work hangs on the lowest rung of the learning ladder—the “What.” Good analysis requires that you interpret what you discover within the context of the work and offer explanation. Good analysis is about the “So What?” Go beyond simply identifying metaphors, for example, and interpret and explain their effects within the work.

In general, the purpose for any literary analysis composition is to present your analyses and prove your interpretations—you will state your argument (thesis/topic sentence) and support it using specific textual evidence to prove your points. The burden of proof is on you! Your argument is only as strong as the details that support it.

The Prewriting Process and Your Analysis of *The Tragedy of Macbeth*

Topic and Purpose: to trace a given motif throughout the play and analyze its significance to the play as a whole. To what theme or idea does this motif point?

Audience: not just the teacher! Write for any peer or adult who has studied this text. Keep them in mind through every step of the writing process—audience and purpose go hand-in-hand when considering

- your topic and its scope (how narrow or broad it is),
- your level of diction and writing style (for this type of composition, keep it formal/scholarly—use standard grammar, avoid informal or slang usage, vary sentence lengths and structures, etc.),
- and what kind of information (and how much of it) you will include.

Since the audience of a literary analysis is familiar with the work in question, avoid excessive summary.

Gathering Details:

Take notes from the text. Using either the given motif chart or note cards, write down every reference to your assigned motif throughout the play (whether stated directly or implied). Be sure to document the speaker, (act.scene.line numbers), and notes on context and significance **WHEN you take each note**—not “later.”

Evaluating and Ordering Details:

1. Evaluate and organize your compiled notes. Give each note a “slug” (see handout). Look for patterns and associations. Separate them into like groups (3-4), and identify the main idea that ties each group together (unity)—write it as a heading for the group. These group headings will become the main points to develop and support your thesis. You will not necessarily use every note you’ve gathered.

Record your main points and the textual details you'll use to support each one. On your own paper, set up the following template to structure your notes:

→ Main point/heading of group of notes: _____

List supporting details below each point (brief description/passages/parenthetical documentation):

- o
- o
- o
- o

Use your own paper to create your own organization of notes—this is a template only!

→ Main point: _____

Supporting Details:

- o
- o
- o

Etc. *Again--use your own paper to create your specific organization of notes!*

2. Craft a preliminary **thesis** that articulates clearly your team's conclusion about your motif. For now include the author's full name and the title of the work in your thesis statement.

Example 1: In William Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of Macbeth*, the recurrence of _____ (motif)

suggests (what idea/theme?) _____

through (main point I.) _____, (main pt. II) _____,

and (main pt. III) _____.

Note the addition of the main points to your thesis, called the comment. Think of your thesis like a road map for your audience: tell them where you're taking them and what your main stops will be along the way.

Example 2: The multiple financial references in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* echo Hamlet's continual question about man's worth by equating the value of one's reputation, capacity for love, and ultimate meaning and purpose with crass currency.

Use your own wording to craft a coherent thesis statement.

The above structures are guidelines—not to be applied strictly.

3. Create a preliminary outline that presents your thesis and main supporting points only. Follow given rules for content and formatting.
4. Flesh out your preliminary outline to create a full outline. Add and order the specific details you will use to support each point and fully develop your thesis. Use all given guidelines. Emulate given examples!

The First Draft

If you have taken thorough notes and have carefully analyzed and organized them into a coherent outline, then you're 90% of the way to your first draft.

With your outline and relevant notes in front of you, begin with your thesis and body paragraphs. You can craft the full introduction later. For each body paragraph—

1. **State** clearly the main point that supports your thesis (topic sentence).
2. **Develop** that point fully with specific textual evidence (your notes). Elaborate as necessary to connect each detail back to the main point; avoid belaboring any point, though. Your audience will not appreciate that.
3. **Wrap up** your main point and **transition** to your next point.