

What is a Literary Analysis?

Simply put, a literary analysis is an essay in which a literary text (or an aspect of a text) is analyzed. (Duh!) Literary analysis requires writers to develop (and argue) a particular and specific interpretation of a specified text (or an aspect of a text). This interpretation is an original idea or way of understanding the text that is specific to you—the reader of the text and writer of the essay. Literary analysis considers what a text does and how it does it; in general, academic readers and writers are not interested in what a text means or the moral of the story (though there are exceptions to this rule).

Your goal as a writer of a literary analysis is to convince your reader—your peers and your teacher—that your well-supported argument is a reasonable interpretation. Each essay you write will have a clear focus—thesis statement—and support that thesis by breaking your evidence into chunks and explaining it. That's what analysis is—breaking things into manageable chunks to use in your explanation/interpretation. What those chunks are depends on what kind of essay you're writing.

For this course, you will write two literary analysis essays, both of which you will peer workshop and revise. The due dates for drafts and revisions are on the calendar. You will write:

1. One essay on *Parable of the Sower* (20% of grade) due after we finish the book.
 2. One essay on *Hamilton* (20% of grade) due after we finish the musical.
- Both must be 1500 words or more, and meet the assignment criteria established here.
 - At least one of the essays listed above must engage a theoretical lens.
 - At least one of the essays listed above must include secondary sources with corresponding MLA citation and Works Cited. *Critical Theory Today*, *Hamilton: The Revolution*, and other materials I've provided for this class (with the exception of the peer reviewed critical essays I've sourced) do not count as a secondary source for our purposes here.
 - You can use theory and secondary sources in both essays if you want.
 - Essay topic ideas will be discussed when we get to each specific work.
 - Failing to complete one of the essays will result in failing the course.

Requirements. Each essay should:

- Be typed 1500+ words, in MLA format w/ works cited. Final drafts submitted to d2l dropbox.
- Be worked through the writing process: draft, feedback, revision.
- Demonstrate the use the additional resources in D2L about how to conduct a literary analysis, as well as engage the subject matter of the course: the literary terms, schemata, and theories we've been working with since week one are your friends. Use them.
- Develop a clear thesis and control it through focused analysis and textual support. A thesis is arguable and supportable. Arguable in an academic sense means that reasonable, educated people might have differing opinions about the subject, but can see your point. See cherripoter.com/thesis.html for more information.
- Use theory to conduct their analysis, but don't quote from theory. Writers here should assume the audience has a handle on basic literary theory, so don't quote it in your text.
- Write in your own words, and should only include short, quoted passages from the sources, cited in MLA. No essay should incorporate more than ≈15% quoted text. The smallest piece of quoted text to get your message across is the best. Use the Turnitin dropbox to test your citations and quotes.

- Include very little plot summary. Any summarized material should be brief in nature serve the purpose of the analysis and explanation you need the text for. Summary is active here.
- Avoid quoting from sites like Sparknotes—or Wikis or Abouts or Shmoop or wherever you get your version of junkwords. I go to Sparknotes sometimes, to clarify a scene or find background information, but I don't quote from it in my writing as it is not an academic source. What you personally have to say is always more interesting than what Sparknotes has to say. The only exception is if your argument is something like, why Sparknotes has it wrong about X, and why Y is true interpretation. Same goes with film adaptations.

Primary and Secondary Sources

A PRIMARY source can be a number of things depending on the discipline. In this literature class, the primary source is the work of literature being analyzed. If you're writing about a poem, the poem is the primary text; if you're writing about a novel or story, those are the primary texts. In other disciplines the primary text might look a little different. For instance, if you're studying genealogy, a primary text might be the birth and death ledger kept by a church, or a marriage license filed with the city. If you're studying American history, primary sources might include the documents written by the founding fathers, and the letters and diaries they wrote alongside them.

SECONDARY sources are texts written *about* primary sources. A secondary source might interpret a primary source, offer summary or more information, provide narrative structure, or give analysis about subject matters related to those sources. For example, history text book that covers the formation of the American government during and after the revolution is a secondary source which refers to and interprets those documents written by the founding fathers and their diaries and letters, and has the benefit of distance to make sense of the confusions.

In the academic world we're particular about what kinds of secondary sources are credible and appropriate. The best place to find secondary sources is the library databases. If you're unfamiliar with these, the [librarians can help](#), and you can make a one-on-one research appointment with a librarian to dive deeper in to any subject.

Secondary Sources for Literary Analysis

Because literary studies borrows from all the disciplines, what can be used as a secondary source in a literary analysis is a wide range of mixed materials. Secondary sources should always help the writer illuminate an aspect of the primary source. *High Fidelity*, a novel by Nick Hornby, follows depressed Gen Xer Rob through a series of messed up romantic relationships. To illuminate how Rob's character works, a writer might find an article written about Gen X psychology (like "Nick Hornby and the Plight of Gen X" by Michael Berkowitz) and use that to support their arguments about *High Fidelity*. These kinds of sources usually are found in peer edited (academic/scholarly) journals or periodicals that you can access in the library databases. More popular sources, like *The Atlantic* and *The New Yorker*, regularly do cultural criticism that might also apply, though. Another kind of secondary source is a source not specifically about the primary source, but maybe related to the subject matter. For instance, Barbara Kingsolver's novel, *Prodigal Summer*, references Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, which might be an interesting source to use in support an interpretation.

Keep in mind, theory isn't usually a secondary source so much as it's a tool to help crack open a primary source. Use theory to peel back the layers of character and plot, but quote theory rarely.

Close Reading

All literary analysis requires close reading, though what exactly you're close reading for depends on the topic you choose to write about. You might choose a symbol/idea/image from a text and develop your essay by illuminating for the reader how that element works. Examples of this are discussing how the hurricane imagery works in "Every Little Hurricane" or noting the role of reading and books in "Iris Doesn't Walk." You could also look at point of view, plot, setting, characters, etc.—any elements of literature you can break into pieces and examine in close detail (which is analysis). The only real parameters for choosing a topic is that you need to be able to support your ideas—whatever they are—with evidence and quoting from the primary texts you choose to analyze.

You can also view any literary text through a theoretical lens. Some lenses will be more productive tools for some texts than others. Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* is a coming-of-age story about an impoverished underdog, and Psychoanalysis, Marxism, and Post-Colonial theory are going to give you the most bang for your buck. Although you could also do a Feminist analysis of this text, it wouldn't be as lucrative for you as the others in gleaning content for your essay.

So, what exactly are you doing again?

The primary challenge in an essay of this size is focus; less is usually more. In a short essay I can't tell you everything I think about *Pride and Prejudice*—that would take hundreds of pages. However, in a few pages, I can talk about how Elizabeth's first impressions of Darcy and Wickham are formed immediately and strongly, but also note how these impressions change over the course of the book. To do so, I would give examples from the book of her first impressions. I would quote exact text and explain how and why these impressions are formed, why they are accurate or inaccurate, and what makes her change her mind. So, I explain how I think and understand this one element of the book—as the way I understand it is different than the way other readers understand it.

Notice that for this topic, I narrow the focus to Elizabeth's first impressions of two characters. Elizabeth, as well as many other characters in the novel, have other accurate or inaccurate first impressions, but as a writer, I know I can't cover them all in a short essay. So, I narrow my topic down to one aspect of the book. Keep in mind that this topic does not tell the reader everything there is to know about the book, nor does it tell about every character or every important event. It doesn't even tell the reader everything there is to know about Elizabeth. You are not writing a summary of the book nor are you writing a book report. Rather you are writing about how you understand or interpret this one specific slice of the book, which is a narrow and sophisticated task.

This example topic focuses in on one slice of something—Elizabeth's experience of first impressions with only two other characters. The scope is small so the writer can manage their own ideas for a short length of time and space. I might recommend if a student picked this topic that they put their focus on Elizabeth's impression of only one character, not both, just to narrow it down that much more.

Your rough drafts might be long and meandering, though. We often don't decide what to narrow in on until we've discovered a variety of things to say and have seen what we have the most to say about, and we do this through the drafting process. There is more about the drafting, feedback, and revision processes in the course modules.