

Critical Analysis of Literature

When you are asked to write an analysis of a short story or novel, you should use the skills of literary analysis. Critical papers analyze and explain some important points about a piece of literature. They do not repeat the plot.

The following items will help you organize and plan your paper. You do not need to include every one of these items in every paper you write, but you should select the elements that are most necessary for your topic. Use this as a checklist for your literary analysis.

Introduction

Write a draft of the introduction first. Revise it after you have completed the paper.

Statement of Topic: Your topic is the work of literature, taken as a whole. Be sure to indicate this by naming the work and its author early on, in the first part of the paper.

Statement of Interest: Explain the point that interests you.

Statement of Problem: Explain the critical disagreement, textual problem, or other problem you are considering. This can be a broad statement such as "In this paper, I would like to explore the presence and effects of Irish Catholicism throughout James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*." A more specific problem statement might read like this: "Here, I will closely examine the descriptive language that James Joyce uses in Chapter 3 of *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*."

Your way to solve the Problem: Explain how your paper will try to solve that problem or analyze a central point. Any of these methods may be useful in this section:

- Analysis of theme
- Close textual analysis
- Sociological, psychological, or historical context
- Survey of other critical opinions
- Analysis of images of figurative language
- Analysis of structure
- Analysis of character
- Interpretation of lines

Statement of Thesis: What is the main point your paper will illustrate and/or explain? Give a clear statement, preferably in one sentence.

Forecast of Organization: In longer papers especially, give the reader a map of a guide to the organization that you will follow. If, for example, you will examine three important passages in the work, then say so in this section.

Body of the Paper

All paragraphs, sections, and chapters must support your thesis and work toward a solution to the problem you have stated.

Support for your argument: Be sure that every paragraph has a unified topic that helps to develop your argument. Here are some ways to provide this support:

- Use specific quotes and illustrations from the work you are discussing.
- Analyze characters carefully: what they do, what they say, what they saw, how other treat them, what other say about them, what the narrator says about them.
- Isolate the main issues, and find words or passages that justify your emphasis.
- Provide a close reading or textual analysis.
- Use vivid verbs that give a sense of sight, sound, or activity.
- Avoid the passive voice unless there is good reason to use it.
- Cite important critics who support your thesis, and explain how they support it.
- Answer the critics who argue against your thesis.

Use your best arguments and your strongest examples last.

Conclusion

For a longer paper, the conclusion should review the argument that you have pursued and should restate the thesis. Highlight the importance of your argument. Leave your reader feeling satisfied that you know the material, have discussed it fairly, and have argued your thesis convincingly. Never end a paper with a conclusion from someone else. Conclusions should always be written completely in your own words. (Do not use quotations, from either the original text or a critical text, in the conclusion.)