

Writing a Literary Analysis



To **analyze**, by definition, is to examine, in detail, the structure/makeup of something with the purpose of explaining or interpreting how its parts work together. A literary analysis is a paper on one, or many, of the key elements in a text and how they support a main idea or purpose. When writing a literary analysis, you are **analyzing** in a text, but **not summarizing** those specific elements.

Step 1: Identify the Author's Purpose

Identifying the author's purpose will serve as the thesis/backbone of your paper. There will be many purposes uncovered as you read, but choose the one that speaks most to you. This is also defined as a theme of the text. A **theme** is an abstract concept that portrays a message, claim, or life lesson.

In the text *Romeo and Juliet* by William Shakespeare, a main theme is forbidden love.

In the text *The Fault in our Stars* by John Green, a main theme is death and coming to terms with morality in the face of illness.

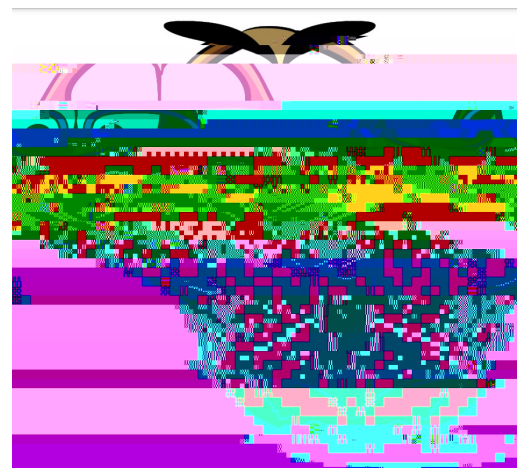
What main idea did the author want the reader to understand or take away from the text?

What idea do you, as a reader, feel is most prevalent?

Step 2: Analyze Key Elements

After a purpose is identified, the next step is to figure out how the author portrays this theme and why you came to the conclusion that this theme is both important and prevalent. The elements to be analyzed are **plot, characters, setting, and symbols**.

Plot is the sequence of events that make up a story. This will serve as the evidence/support throughout your paper.



What main conflicts occurred throughout the story?

What are the main events of the story? What is the order of these events? Does the order have significance to the purpose?



Is there anything to note about the role that time of day plays in the story?

Is the location or changing of location significant to the purpose of the overall piece?

Does the author intentionally bring forth any social or cultural contexts to aid their purpose?



Step 3: Connect Ideas

After you have identified a purpose and the key elements in the story, you need to connect the two together. In order to do this, you need to be sure to keep the purpose in mind at all times and remember that every element analysis should be geared towards its role in explaining or emphasizing the purpose you have chose to focus on.

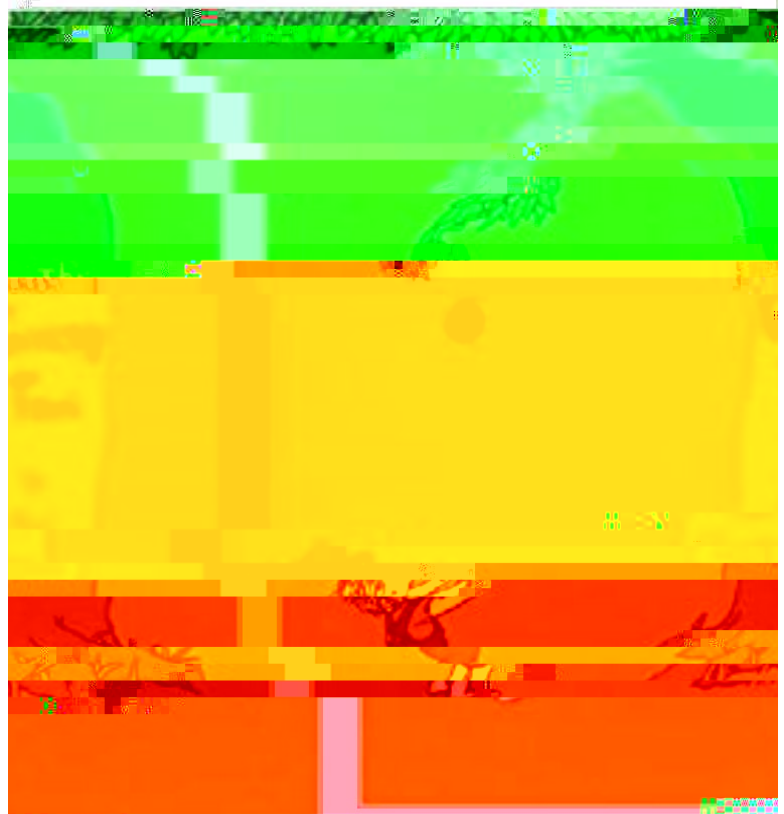
Example

The below example demonstrates the steps taken before beginning to write a literary analysis paper. Our example is taken from Shel Silverstein's *The Giving Tree*. The author's purpose is identified before



The simple, straightforward diction of this piece allows for an enjoyable read for the audience, as well as a relatable interpretation of the overall theme. There is quite a bit of repetition in this story in regards to the mention of being happy and time which emphasized what Shel Silverstein wanted his audience to be drawn to.

The female tree serves as a symbol for a mother, or motherly figure. The increasingly sporadic visits to the tree by the boy symbolize a child's decreasing dependency on their mother as they grow up.



After you have identified a purpose and the key elements in the story, you need to create a thesis that shows how these two connect. In other words, you need to show how these key elements play a role in the argument that the text is making about a specific theme. It is important to keep this thesis in mind while analyzing the text because your analysis of the element(s) should

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Through his use of figurative language, particularly symbols and metaphors, Shel Silverstein portrays the sacrificial nature of a mother's love.

Additional Resources

[Writing Effectively about Literature](#)

[Narrative Elements](#)

[Defining Figurative Language](#)

: For more detailed help or if you have questions, visit the Writing Center located in the Lewis University Library or call 815-- use of f / 427.

Roane State Owl Types of Papers: Literary Analysis Fiction and Drama by Jackie White