

A Guide to Writing the Literary Analysis Essay

I. **INTRODUCTION:** the first paragraph in your essay. It begins creatively in order to catch your reader's interest, provides essential background about the literary work, and prepares the reader for your major thesis. The introduction must include the *author and title* of the work as well as an explanation of the *theme* to be discussed. Other essential background **may** include *setting, an introduction of main characters, etc.* The *major thesis* goes in this paragraph usually at the end. Because the major thesis sometimes sounds tacked on, make special attempts to link it to the sentence that precedes it by building on a key word or idea.

A) **Creative Opening/Hook:** the beginning sentences of the introduction that catch the reader's interest. Ways of beginning creatively include the following:

1) **A startling fact or bit of information**

- ✓ **Example:** Nearly two hundred citizens were arrested as witches during the Salem witch scare of 1692. Eventually nineteen were hanged, and another was pressed to death (Marks 65).

2) **A snatch of dialogue between two characters**

- ✓ **Example:** "It is another thing. You [Frederic Henry] cannot know about it unless you have it."
"Well," I said. "If I ever get it I will tell you [priest]." (Hemingway 72).
With these words, the priest in Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* sends the hero, Frederic, in search of the ambiguous "it" in his life.

3) **A meaningful quotation (from the book you are analyzing or another source)**

- ✓ **Example:** "To be, or not to be, that is the question" {3.1.57}. This familiar statement expresses the young prince's moral dilemma in William Shakespeare's tragedy *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*.

4) **A universal idea**

- ✓ **Example:** The terrifying scenes a soldier experiences on the front probably follow him throughout his life—if he manages to survive the war.

5) **A rich, vivid description of the setting**

- ✓ **Example:** Sleepy Maycomb, like other Southern towns, suffers considerably during the Great Depression. Poverty reaches from the privileged families, like the Finches, to the Negroes and "white trash" Ewells, who live on the outskirts of town. Harper Lee paints a vivid picture of life in this humid Alabama town where tempers and bigotry explode into conflict.

B) **Thesis**: a statement that provides the subject and overall opinion of your essay. For a literary analysis your major thesis must

- (1) relate to the theme of the work and
- (2) suggest how this theme is revealed by the author. A good thesis may also suggest the organization of the paper.

- ✓ **Example:** Through Paul's experience behind the lines, at a Russian prisoner of war camp, and especially under bombardment in the trenches, Erich Maria Remarque realistically shows how war dehumanizes a man.

Sometimes a thesis becomes too cumbersome to fit into one sentence. In such cases, you may express the major thesis as two sentences.

- ✓ **Example:** In a Tale of Two Cities, Charles Dickens shows the process by which a wasted life can be redeemed. Sidney Carton, through his love for Lucie Manette, is transformed from a hopeless, bitter man into a hero whose life and death have meaning.

II. BODY PARAGRAPHS

A) **Body**: the support paragraphs of your essay. These paragraphs contain supporting Example: (concrete detail) and analysis/explanation (commentary) for your topic sentences. Each paragraph in the body includes (1) a topic sentence, (2) textual evidence (a.k.a. quotes from your reading) and commentary (a.k.a. explanation), and (3) a concluding sentence. In its simplest form, each body paragraph is organized as follows:

1. topic sentence
2. lead-in to textual evidence 1
3. textual evidence 1
4. commentary
5. transition and lead-in to textual evidence 2
6. textual evidence 2
7. commentary
8. concluding or clincher sentence

1) **Topic Sentence**: the first sentence of a body or support paragraph. It identifies one aspect of the major thesis and states a primary reason why the major thesis is true.

- ✓ **Example:** When he first appears in the novel, Sidney Carton is a loveless outcast who sees little worth in himself or in others.

2) **Textual Evidence:** a specific example from the work used to provide evidence for your topic sentence. Textual evidence can be a combination of paraphrase and direct quotation from the work.

- ✓ **Example:** When Carlton and Darnay first meet at the tavern, Carlton tells him, “I care for no man on this earth, and no man cares for me” (Dickens 105).

3) **Commentary:** your explanation and interpretation of the textual evidence. Commentary tells the reader what the author of the text means or how the textual evidence proves the topic sentence. Commentary may include interpretation, analysis, argument, insight, and/or reflection. (Helpful hint: In your body paragraph, you should have twice as much commentary as textual evidence. In other words, for every sentence of textual evidence, you should have at least two sentences of commentary.)

- ✓ **Example:** Carton makes this statement as if he were excusing his rude behavior to Darnay. Carton, however, is only pretending to be polite, perhaps to amuse himself. With this seemingly off-the-cuff remark, Carton reveals a deeper cynicism and his emotional isolation.

4) **Transitions:** words or phrases that connect or “hook” one idea to the next, both between and within paragraphs. Transition devices include using connecting words as well as repeating key words or using synonyms.

- ✓ **Examples:** Finally, in the climax... Another example: ...
Later in the story... In contrast to this behavior...
Not only...but also... Furthermore...

5) **Lead-In:** phrase or sentence that prepares the reader for textual evidence by introducing the speaker, setting, and/or situation.

- ✓ **Example:** Later, however, when the confident Sidney Carton returns alone to his home, his alienation and unhappiness become apparent: “Climbing into a high chamber in a well of houses, he threw himself down in his clothes on a neglected bed, and its pillow was wet with wasted tears” (Dickens 211).

6) **Clincher/Concluding Sentence:** last sentence of the body paragraph. It concludes the paragraph by tying the textual evidence and commentary back to the thesis.

- ✓ **Example:** Thus, before Carton experiences love, he is able to convince himself that the world has no meaning.

III. CONCLUSION: last paragraph in your essay. This paragraph should begin by echoing your major thesis without repeating the words exactly. Then, the conclusion should broaden from the thesis statements to answer the “so what?” question your reader may have after reading your essay. The conclusion should do one or more of the following:

- 1) Reflect on how your essay topic relates to the book as a whole
- 2) Evaluate how successful the author is in achieving his or her goal or message
- 3) Give a personal statement about the topic
- 4) Make predictions
- 5) Connect back to your creative opening
- 6) Give your opinion of the novel’s value or significance

HOW TO CITE TEXTUAL EVIDENCE WITHIN YOUR PAPER

PRIMARY SOURCE: The literary work (novel, play, story, poem) to be discussed in an essay.

- ✓ **Example:** : Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men*
Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Tell-tale Heart”

For most literary analysis papers, you will be using **ONLY PRIMARY SOURCES

SECONDARY SOURCE: Any source (other than the primary source) referred to in the essay. Secondary sources can include critical analyses, biographies of the author, reviews, history books, encyclopedias etc.

When citing primary or secondary sources, follow MLA style for parenthetical documentation and “Works Cited” page.

WORKS CITED: a separate page listing all the works cited in an essay. It simplifies documentation because it permits you to make only brief references to those works in the text (parenthetical documentation). A “Works Cited” page differs from a “Bibliography” in that the latter includes sources researched but not actually cited in the paper. All the entries on a “Works Cited” page are double spaced.

PARENTHETICAL DOCUMENTATION: a brief parenthetical reference placed where a pause would naturally occur to avoid disrupting the flow of your writing (usually at the end of a sentence, before the period).

Most often you will use the author’s last name and page number clearly referring to a source listed on the “Works Cited” page:

- ✓ **Example:** Hemingway’s writing declined in his later career (Shien 789).

If you cite the author in the text of your paper, give only the page number in parentheses:

- ✓ **Example:** According to Francis Guerin, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* reflects “those same nightmarish shadows that even in our own time threaten to obscure the American Dream” (49).

If two works by the same author appear in your “Works Cited,” add the title or a shortened version of it to distinguish your sources:

- ✓ **Example:** “He wouldn’t rest until he had run a mile or more” (Dickens, *A Tale* 78).

BLOCK QUOTATION: quotations that are set off from the rest of the paper. Indent one-inch from the left margin only and double space. Do not use quotation marks unless they appear in the original.

1) For a prose quotation of more than 4 typed lines, start the quotation after a colon and indent each line of the quotation 10 spaces, placing the citation *after* the end punctuation.

- ✓ **Example:**

Based on rumors and gossip, the children of Maycomb speculate about

Boo Radley’s appearance:

Boo was about six-and-a-half feet tall, judging from his tracks; he dined on raw squirrels and any cats he could catch, that’s why his hands were bloodstained—if you ate an animal raw, you could never wash the blood off.

There was a long jagged scar that ran across his face; what teeth he had were yellow and rotten; his eyes popped, and he drooled most of the time. (Lee 13)

2) For any prose dialogue involving 2 or more speakers, start the quotation (dialogue) after a colon and have each line of dialogue as its own paragraph (a 10-space indentation), placing the citation information *after* the end punctuation.

- ✓ **Example:**

During the trial scene, Bob Ewell immediately shows his disrespect for both the court and his family:

“Are you the father of Mayella Ewell?” was the next question.

“Well, if I ain’t I can’t do nothing about it now, her ma’s dead,” was the answer. (Lee 172)

**Sample Essay With
Primary Source Only**

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The Symbolism of the Conch

For centuries philosophers have debated the question of whether man is innately evil. William Golding poses this question in his realistic novel *Lord of the Flies*. Set on a tropical island during World War II, the novel begins when schoolboys from Great Britain are being flown to safety and their plane is shot down. No adults survive, and the boys are left to govern themselves and get rescued. William Golding uses symbolism in the form of the conch to represent the concept of society. The boys' evolving relationship with the conch illustrates Golding's theme that humans, when removed from the pressures of civilized authority, will become evil.

In the beginning, the boys view the conch as an important symbol that unites them and gives them the power to deal with their difficult situation. When the conch is first found and blown, it brings everyone together: "Ralph found his breath and blew a series of short blasts. Piggy exclaimed, 'There's one!'" (Golding 16). Here Piggy observes one boy emerging from the jungle but soon boys conform all around. Each comes for his own reason: some for plain curiosity, other for the prospect of rescue. They all form the first assembly thanks to the conch. The first job of this assembly is to unite even further and choose a leader or chief. Once again the conch plays an important part. It is Ralph who is chosen to be chief, and the main reason for this is because he holds the conch. When it is put to a vote, the boys exclaim, "Him with the shell. Ralph! Ralph! Let him

be chief with the trumpet-thing” (Golding 21). Because Ralph possesses the conch, a symbol of power and authority, he is chosen chief. Thus, at first the conch is an important object bringing civilizing influences to the boys as they work together to make the best of a bad situation.

Gradually, however, the conch becomes less important to the boys, signifying their gradual turn to evil. When the boys first start a fire on top of the mountain, Piggy holds the conch and attempts to speak. But Jack rebukes him by saying, “The conch doesn’t count on top of the mountain, so you shut up” (Golding 39). Boys like Jack begin to place limitations on the conch and lose respect for it and one another. Then one day at an assembly, Jack places even less importance on the conch excluding more of the boys and thus diminishing the democratic order and authority that the conch provides. He says, “We don’t need the conch any more. We know who ought to say thins...It’s time some people knew they’ve got to keep quiet and leave deciding things to the rest of us” (Golding 92). Jack’s assertion here clearly connects the demise of the conch to a change in the social order. Jack is slowly becoming a power-hungry dictator, and we see the orderly influence of the conch replaced by man’s evil impulses.

In the end, the conch loses significance to all but Piggy, and most of the boys turn into evil savages. Piggy tells Ralph to call an assembly, and Ralph only laughs. Finally, after Piggy’s glasses are stolen, he tells Ralph, “Blow the conch, blow as loud as you can.” The forest reechoed; and birds lifted, crying out of the treetops, as on that first morning ages ago” (Golding 154). Piggy believes that the authority of the conch will once again

bring the boys together, but only four boys meet in this assembly. The rest have joined Jack's savage tribe. The goal of their last assemble is to get Piggy's glasses back form Jack. Therefore, the assembly moves to Castle Rock where Roger, the torturer and executioner of Jack's group, rolls a boulder off the mountain and puts an end to the conch and its one true supporter:

The rock struck Piggy a glancing blow form chin to knee; the conch exploded into a thousand white fragments and ceased to exist. Piggy, saying nothing, with no time for even a grunt, traveled through the air sideways form the rock, turning over as he went...Piggy fell forty feet and landed on his back across the square red rock in the sea. His head opened and stuff came out and turned red. (Golding 164-165)

It is fitting here that the destruction of the conch accompanies the boys' first intentional act of murder on the island. Thus their final descent into evil is complete. Now, with the authority of the conch destroyed, Jack's group is given license to become total savages. The next day, they would hut Ralph to kill him, thus leaving behind the civilizing influences of the conch forever.

Golding uses the conch shell to show the slow slide of the boys into savagery, thereby exemplifying the theme that humans have the capability to turn evil. At first, the conch brings everyone together; then, as its power erodes, the group breaks into two. Finally, the destruction of the conch signals the plunge into total savagery. By following the role of the conch in the story, we see how Golding uses it to unify the central events of the story around his theme of inevitable evil. Golding is an artist, not a philosopher,

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but through his art he answers the question debated for centuries by philosophers: Is man innately evil? According to *Lord of the Flies*, he is.

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Works Cited

Golding, William. *Lord of the Flies*. New York: The Putnam Publishing Group, 1954.

**This guide has been adapted from “A Guide to Writing the Literary Analysis Essay” at:
<http://powayusd.sdcoe.k12.ca.us/pusdrbhs/academics/english/curriculum/literaryguide.pdf>