

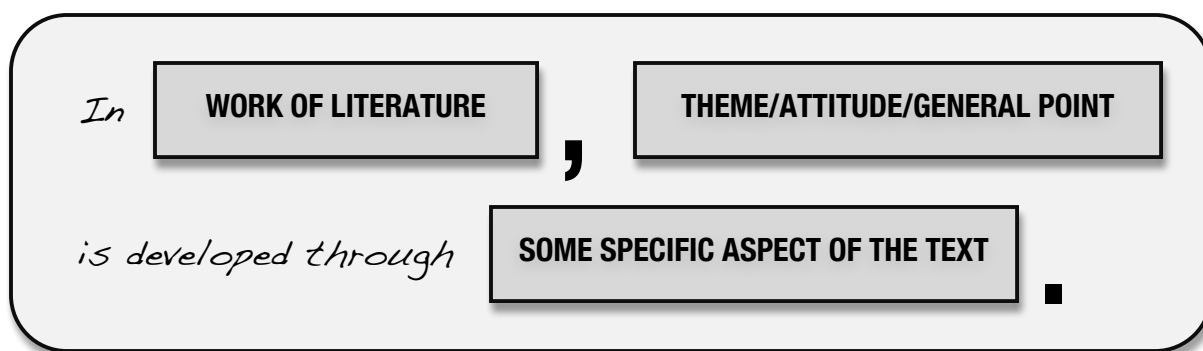
WRITING A LITERARY ANALYSIS ESSAY

WHY?

The purpose of a literary analysis essay is to carefully examine or “close read” an aspect of a work of literature. The goal of this process is, of course, to better understand the work as a whole.

WHAT’S AN “ASPECT OF A WORK OF LITERATURE”?

As with any analysis, the best way to start is to break the subject/text into its component parts. For instance, an analysis of a **poem** could deal with the different types of images in the poem or with the relationship between the form and content of the work. If you were to analyze a **play**, you might examine the character flaws of the tragic hero by tracing how it is revealed through the acts of the play. Analyzing a **short story** might involve identifying a particular theme (such as the transition from adolescence to adulthood) and showing how the writer suggests that theme through the point of view through which the story is told—the possibilities are endless! The common formula for a good, solid analysis, then, goes something like this:



Of course, this format is not the only way to make an argument, but it’s a good starting point.

SOME LITERARY ELEMENTS TO CONSIDER FOR ANALYSIS:

- ▶ **Theme:** Does the author seem to be saying something about fate? Ambition? Courage? Greed? Jealousy? Something else? Does the selection show you what it is like to experience racism? Loneliness? Does the author have a point to make about a specific historical event?
- ▶ **Characters:** How (if at all) does the protagonist change from the beginning to end? What forces or circumstances make one of the characters act in a certain way? Consider the setting, conflict, other characters, etc. What are the most revealing aspects of one of the characters? Consider his or her thoughts, words, and actions. Do the characters’ actions seem believable within the story? What is the role of a minor character? How important or reliable is this person?
- ▶ **Plot:** What external or internal conflict affects the main character? How is suspense built into the story? Are there any twists to the plot? What do they add to the story? Does the plot follow a basic pattern of fiction?
- ▶ **Setting:** What effect does the setting have on the characters? Does the setting expand your understanding of a specific time and place? Is the setting new and thought-provoking?
- ▶ **Style:** How does the writing (descriptive phrases, images, and so on) create an overall feeling or tone in the selection? Is dialogue or description used effectively? Is there an important symbol that adds meaning to the selection? How is this symbol represented in different parts of the story? Are there key figures of speech (such as metaphors)?
- ▶ **Intertextuality:** Are there other works mentioned in the text? Often, this occurs only through allusions or quotes. What is the purpose of including these? What insight do these allusions lend to the main text?