

## CRITICAL ANALYSIS

A **critical analysis of literature** or **literary criticism** is a detailed study of one aspect of fiction, verse, or drama such as *plot construction, characterization, symbolism, imagery, theme, or point of view*.

**When you write such a paper, your intent is to:**

1. **Study** one element in a work so you can better understand and better appreciate the work as a whole
2. **Test** your critical judgment as a thinker and a writer
3. **Share** your examination with your reader.

Before you can make such a study, you must read closely and understand the work as a whole. Because your writing should be as objective as possible, the essay itself needs to be written in an objective tone and point of view. You must determine the author's purpose or intention because only on that basis can you make any judgment fairly or have any true understanding. If your essay is to have any purpose, it must, at the least, confirm a specific judgment you have about a literary work or provide a convincing interpretation of such a work. Your main idea must be clearly stated for the reader—both as the thesis in your outline and in your essay.

**Overall, there are basically three kinds of assignments you may be required to write for a critical analysis essay. There are those in which you will:**

**Analyze** – which means taking the story, poem, or other work apart to consider one or more of its elements such as *plot* or *character*

**Interpret** – which means discovering a work's possible meaning(s)

**Evaluate** – which means judging a work's merit and considering whether or not its author has been successful.

When writing about literature, use all the skills you bring to any other writing assignment. Your goal is to make a point and support it with appropriate direct references to the work under consideration or even to other related works. Beyond this, additional sources (known as **secondary sources**) commenting on the literature you are examining are sometimes required and may be used to help you further support your position.

**The following are important requirements for any valid study. You should follow each of them carefully:**

1. Closely read the work you are studying. Take note of things which spark your interest.
2. Consider the various aspects of the work:
  - A. What function do certain characters play in the work's plot or theme?
  - B. What significance does the setting hold?
  - C. Are there any words, images, or concepts that seem to be repeated?
3. When writing about literature always use present tense verbs; use past tense verbs only when discussing *actual historical events*.
5. Support all your points with specific, concrete examples from the work you are discussing.
6. Combine quotations, summaries, and paraphrases smoothly into your paper.
7. Acknowledge all sources, including work or works under discussion and any **secondary sources** you consult.
8. If MLA documentation format is required by your instructor, use parenthetical references and include a Works Cited list (consult your course handbook) or the current *MLA Documentation Guide for Writers of Research Papers*.

- Always remember to avoid expressions like "I feel," "I believe," or "I think" because such expressions state the obvious and weaken your tone.
- Always remember not to write a plot summary.
- Always remember that the narrator of or a character in a literary work does not necessarily represent the author him or herself.

## SOME QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS HAVE BEEN DESIGNED TO ENHANCE YOUR CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS. Ask yourself these questions while you are reading and use the questions under each respective category to help you think about the work you are considering.

### PLOT

What conflicts occur in the story?

How is the main conflict or series of conflicts resolved?

How do these conflicts move the plot along?

Does the narrative move rapidly?

How do events relate to one another?

How do single events relate to the work as a whole?

How are the events arranged in time?

Is the opening action interesting?

Is the story drawn out after the climax? –*Climax refers to the point of greatest tension or importance in a narrative, the point at which decisive action takes place.*

Is the story convincing, believable?

### SETTING

Where and when do the events take place?

Are many descriptive details given?

Are details given in lumps, or are they worked in gradually?

What is the relationship between the setting and the plot?

How does the setting create the mood of the story?

How does the setting affect the characters?

### CHARACTERIZATION

What conflicts exist between the protagonist and the antagonist?

What traits, feelings, and values are exhibited by the characters?

How do the characters relate to one another?

Are the characters fully developed, or are they stereotypes?

Are the major characters changed by the events that occur in the story? How?

Do the major characters learn from their experiences? How?

Does this knowledge affect the other characters and the plot? How?

How are characters developed? by the narrator? by other characters' descriptions?

### POINT OF VIEW

Is the story told in first, second, or third person?

How much does the narrator know about the events?

Is the narrator attached or involved?

Is the narrator a character in the story?

Is the narrator trustworthy?

### tone and style

What is the tone of the story? (light, serious, bitter, etc.)

What is the narrator's tone in the story?

Are there any examples of irony?

What words or phrases are repeated throughout the story?

Is there any unusual language, or is there an unusual character?

Are there any figures of speech? symbols? patterns of imagery?

Does the length of the piece or of the sentences relate to the effect of the story or how the story reads?

### THEME

What is the central or dominant idea of the work? Be able to express the basic idea in a single sentence.

What issues are considered in the work?

What conflicts are presented in the work?

How does each element of the story contribute to its theme?

Is there an unusual or profound idea as the basis of the story?

Does the theme smother the story, or is it well-integrated within it?

**CREATIVE WORKS MUST BE IDENTIFIED CORRECTLY IN YOUR PAPER.**

Underline or *Italicize* the titles of the following:

aircraft	ballets	books	bulletins	films	journals	magazines
newspapers	novels	operas	paintings	pamphlets	periodicals	plays/drama
long poems	radio series	sculpture	ships	short novels	symphonies	television series
blogs	websites	music CDs/albums		podcast series		

Place “quotation marks” around the titles of the following:

articles	essays	chapters	sections	sermons	short poems	short stories
songs	lectures	reports	individual episodes of television or radio programs or podcasts			

For more information, consult:

- X. J. Kennedy and Dana Gioia’s *Literature: An Introduction to Fiction, Poetry, and Drama*
- The current *MLA Documentation Guide for Writers of Research Papers*
- Your current English course handbook.