

Basic Tips for Writing a Literary Analysis

1. Write in the present tense.

EXAMPLE: In Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily," the townspeople visit Emily Grierson's house because it smells bad.

NOT: In Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily," the townspeople visited Emily Grierson's house because it smelled bad.

2. Normally, keep yourself out of your analysis; in other words, use the third person (no I or you). Some instructors may require or allow the first or second person in an informal analysis if the usage is consistent, however, so check with your instructor.

FIRST PERSON: I believe that the narrator in "Sonny's Blues" is a dynamic character because I read many details about the changes in his attitude toward and relationship with Sonny.

THIRD PERSON: The narrator in "Sonny's Blues" is a dynamic character who changes his attitude toward and relationship with Sonny as the story progresses.

SECOND PERSON: At the end of "Everyday Use," Mama realizes that Maggie is like her but has not received the attention you should give your daughter to help her attain self-esteem.

THIRD PERSON: At the end of "Everyday Use," Mama realizes that Maggie is like her but has not received enough attention to build self-esteem.

3. Avoid summarizing the plot (i.e., retelling the story literally). Instead analyze (form a thesis about and explain) the story in literary terms.

PLOT SUMMARY: In Edgar Allan Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart," the mad narrator explains in detail how he kills the old man, who screams as he dies. After being alerted by a neighbor, the police arrive, and the madman gives them a tour through the house, finally halting in the old man's bedroom, where he has buried the man beneath the floor planks under the bed. As he is talking, the narrator hears what he thinks is the old man's heart beating loudly, and he is driven to confess the murder.

ANALYSIS: Though the narrator claims he is not mad, the reader realizes that the narrator in "The Telltale Heart" is unreliable and lies about his sanity. For example, the mad narrator says he can hear "all things in the heaven and in the earth." Sane people cannot. He also lies to the police when he tells them that the shriek they hear occurs in his dream. Though sane people do lie, most do not meticulously plan murders, lie to the police, and then confess without prompting. Finally, the madman is so plagued with guilt that he hears his own conscience in the form of the old man's heart beating loudly. Dead hearts do not beat, nor do sane people confuse their consciences with the sounds of external objects.

4. Include a clear thesis statement which addresses something meaningful about the literature, often about the theme. (See separate thesis handout.)

5. **Use literary terms to discuss your points (i.e., character, theme, setting, rhyme, point of view, alliteration, symbols, imagery, figurative language, protagonist, and so forth).**

NONLITERARY TERMS: To show that women are important, Adrienne Rich writes about Aunt Jennifer and the tigers that she creates in her needlework.

LITERARY TERMS: The poem "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" contains vivid images and symbols which reveal a feminist perspective.

6. **Do not confuse characters' (in fiction or drama) or speakers' (in poetry) viewpoints with authors' viewpoints.**

AUTHOR: As a black woman, Eudora Welty faces racism in "A Worn Path." (Eudora Welty, the author, was not black.) CHARACTER: As a black woman, Old Phoenix faces racism in "A Worn Path." (Old Phoenix, a character, is black.)

POET: In "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," Robert Frost is tempted to drift into his subconscious dream world, yet he knows he has other obligations to fulfill when he states, "But I have promises to keep, / And miles to go before I sleep." (The pronoun "I" refers to the speaker of the poem, not to Robert Frost, the poet.)

SPEAKER: In "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," the speaker is tempted to drift into his subconscious dream world, yet he knows he has other obligations to fulfill when he states, "But I have promises to keep, / And miles to go before I sleep." (Here the "I" correctly refers to the speaker of the poem.)

7. **Support your points with many quotations and paraphrases, but write the majority of your paper in your own words with your own ideas.**
8. **When writing a research paper that includes literary criticism, make sure that you form your own opinion rather than merely restate those of the critics. You may, however, use the critics' views to support yours.**
9. **Cite prose, poetry, drama, critics, and any other sources used according to specialized MLA standards. (See the current edition of the MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers.)**

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