

Analyzing Literature

Rudy DeLarosa

Throughout the majority of your career as a student, you will be asked to analyze varying pieces of literature such as novels, plays, and poems. This does not mean to *summarize* the work, but instead refers to the process of actually explaining certain aspects of a particular work. This also does not involve simply repeating the plot; anyone who can read can decipher a plot! You must learn to read beneath the surface, to look beyond the words and find the deeper meaning. The following steps are designed to help you in the process of analyzing literature and in the preparation of your paper:

1. BECOME FAMILIAR WITH THE TEXT.

There's just no substitute for a good general knowledge of your story. A good paper inevitably begins with the writer having a solid understanding of the work that he or she interprets. Being able to have the whole book, short story, or play in your head--at least in a general way--when you begin thinking through ideas will be a great help and will actually allow you to write the paper more quickly. It's even a good idea to spend some time just thinking about the story. Flip back through the book and consider what interests you about this piece of writing--what seemed strange, new, important, or otherwise curious about what you read?

2. MAKE A LIST OF POTENTIAL TOPICS.

After reading your story, a topic may just jump out at you, or you may have recognized a *pattern* or identified a *problem* that you'd like to think about in more detail. For example, you may want to focus on themes or literary elements such as: setting, characters, style and language, point of view, imagery, etc.

A **pattern** can be the recurrence of certain kinds of imagery or events. Usually, repetitions of particular aspects of a story (similar events in the plot, similar description, even repetitions in particular words) tend to render those elements more conspicuous.

A **problem**, on the other hand, is something in the story that, to put it plainly, bugs you or that doesn't seem to add up. A character might act in some way that's unaccountable, a narrator may leave out what we think is important information (or may focus on something that seems trivial), or a narrator or character offer an explanation for something that doesn't seem to make sense to us. Not all problems that we have with a story lead in interesting directions, but some definitely do and even seem to be important parts of the story.

3. SELECT A TOPIC WITH A SUITABLE AMOUNT OF EVIDENCE.

If you're selecting from a number of possible topics, narrow down your list by identifying how much evidence or how many specific details you could use to investigate each potential issue. Do this step just off the top of your head. Keep in mind that persuasive papers rely on ample evidence and that having numerous amounts of details to choose from can also make your paper easier to write.

It might be helpful at this point to write down all the events or elements of the story that have some bearing on the two or three topics that seem most promising. This can give you a more visual sense of how much evidence you will have to work with on each potential topic. It's on this activity that having a good knowledge of your story will come in handy and save you a tremendous amount of time. Don't launch into a topic without considering all the options first because you may end up with a topic that seemed promising initially but that only leads to a dead end.

4. WRITE OUT A WORKING THESIS.

Based on the evidence that relates to your topic--and what you anticipate you might say about those pieces of evidence--come up with a working thesis. Don't spend a tremendous amount of time composing this statement at this stage since it will probably change.

5. MAKE AN EXPANDED LIST OF EVIDENCE.

Once you have a working topic in mind, skim back over the story and make a more comprehensive list of the details that relate to your point. As you make your notes keep track of page numbers so you can quickly find the passages in your book again and so you can easily document quoted passages when you write without having to "fish" back through the book. At this point, you want to include anything, *anything*, that might be useful, and you also want to avoid the temptation to arrive at definite conclusions about your topic. Remember that one of the qualities of a good interpretation is that it avoids the obvious. You want to develop complex ideas, and the best way to do that is to keep your ideas flexible until you've considered the evidence carefully. Above all, you don't want to write a simplistic paper, and to avoid that, you need to be willing to challenge or expand your own thoughts. A good gauge of complexity is whether you feel you understand more about your topic than you did when you began (and even just reaching a higher state of confusion is a good indicator that you're treating your topic in a complex way).

When you write down ideas, you can focus on the observations from the narrator or things that certain characters say or do. These elements are certainly important. It might help you come up with more evidence if you also take into account some of the broader components that go into making fiction such as: plot, point of view, character, setting, symbols, etc. Do not include all the elements; include only those that are relevant in proving your thesis.

6. SELECT YOUR EVIDENCE.

Once you've made your expanded list of evidence, decide which supporting details are the strongest. When you make these decisions, keep two points in mind: First, select the facts which bear the closest relation to your thesis statement. Second, choose the pieces of evidence you'll be able to say the most about. *Readers tend to be more dazzled with your interpretations of evidence than with random quotes from the book.* Select the details that will allow you to show off your own reasoning skills and allow you to help the reader see the story in a way he or she may not have seen it before.

7. REFINE YOUR THESIS.

Now that you have a more select list of evidence, you probably have a sharper idea about your main idea than you did before you considered all of your evidence closely. At this stage, go back to your working thesis and refine it so that it reflects your new understanding of your topic. This step and the previous step (selecting evidence) are actually best done at the same time since selecting your evidence and defining the focus of your paper depend upon each other. As you consider refinements to your topic, also consider the scope of your project: how long is the paper supposed to be and what can you reasonably cover in a paper of that length? Remember: quality is always better than quantity.

8. ORGANIZE YOUR EVIDENCE.

Once you have a clear thesis you can go back to your list of selected evidence and group all the similar details together. The ideas that tie these clusters of evidence together can then become the claims that you'll make in your paper. As you begin thinking about what claims you can make (i.e. what kinds of conclusion you can come to) *keep in mind that they should not only relate to all the evidence but should clearly support your thesis as well.* Once you're satisfied with the way you've grouped your evidence and with the way that your claims relate to your thesis, you can begin to consider the most logical way to organize each of those claims. At this stage, some

writers find detailed outlines helpful while others simply group their evidence in a less rigid way and let the finer points of organization take shape as they write.

9. INTERPRET YOUR EVIDENCE.

Avoid the temptation to load your paper with evidence from your story. *Each time you use a specific reference to your story, be sure to explain the significance of that evidence in your own words. Do not simply paraphrase the excerpt, but instead examine why and how the author uses it and what purpose it serves in the text.* To get your readers' interest, you need to bring elements of the story to their attention that they wouldn't necessarily recognize on their own. Thus, if you're quoting passages without interpreting them, you're not taking full advantage of your evidence or demonstrating your reasoning skills. In most cases, interpreting your evidence merely involves putting into your paper what is already in your head. Remember that we, as readers, are lazy--all of us. We don't want to have to figure out a writer's reasoning for ourselves; we want all the thinking to be done for us in the paper. This is your chance to truly shine and show off what you know.

Works Cited

UMC-CH Writing Center. 1998. University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. 27 Aug. 2004

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