

## How to analyze a text-Becoming an active reader instead of a passive one

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Listed below is a quick reference guide to the difficult task known as analyzing a text:

1. Read or reread the text with specific questions in mind. The rereading aspect generally depends upon what the essay prompt is asking you to do with the work.
2. Arrange basic ideas, events and character's names in relation to how they appear or occur in the work.
3. While you are reading and when you finish the work, think through your personal reaction: Can you identify with any of the characters or themes of the work? Why do you or do you not enjoy the work? What significance does the work have for you? How does it apply or relate to you, to society, or to any other work you have read?
4. Identify and consider the most important ideas (importance will depend on context clues and the prompt).
5. Pay close attention to the author's use of literary elements. What purpose do they serve in the text? Why does the author use them? Also, try and locate a pattern or a problem that occurs in the work.

### Principles of analyzing

1. Form a working thesis based upon what the prompt is asking you to do. When writing the body paragraphs, offer a topic sentence indicating a basic observation or assertion that you are going to discuss and prove within that paragraph.
2. Locate and mark specific passages in the work that pertain to what you are trying to prove in the thesis.
3. While writing, offer a context, *not a summary*, for where and when the passage occurs in the work.
4. Cite the passage using MLA guidelines. Generally, it is the author's last name followed by a page number within parenthesis. EX: (King 123).
5. Then follow the passage with some combination (**not all of them!**) of the following elements:
  - Discuss what happens in the passage and why it is significant to the work as a whole.
  - Consider what is said, particularly subtleties of the imagery and the ideas expressed.
  - Assess how it is said (focus on *tone*), considering how the word choice (diction), the ordering of ideas, sentence structure, etc. contribute to the meaning of the passage.
  - Explain the meaning of the passage, tying your analysis of the passage back to the significance of the work as a whole.
  - Repeat the process of context, quotation and analysis with additional support for your thesis or topic sentence.

To aid in your understanding of what it means to analyze a text, I have included a list of some important literary concepts.

#### The Basics

- Plot
- Theme
- Setting
- Narration/point of view
- Characterization
- Symbol
- Metaphor
- Genre

#### Other key concepts

- Historical context
- Social, Political, Economic context
- Ideology
- Multiple voices

- Irony/Ambiguity

Below is an example based upon William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" on the difference between a simple plot summary and an analysis:

**Prompt:** In William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily," analyze the importance of appearances. How do appearances contribute to the overall development of the characters? What do these appearances symbolize?

**Plot summary:** After Miss Emily's long illness following her father's death, she cuts her hair and emerges as a new woman. ☹

**Analysis:** Miss Emily's reemergence with short hair marks her rebirth into a world devoid of the heavy-handed influence of her father. Faulkner likens her new appearance to a young girl and an angel, thereby emphasizing her innocence and purity. ☺