Writing a Literary Analysis

What Is Literary Analysis?
- It’s literary.
- It’s an analysis.
- It’s an Argument!
- It may also involve research on and analysis of secondary sources.

How Is It “Literary”?
- Usually, a literary analysis will involve a discussion of a text as writing, thus the term literary, which means “having to do with letters.”
- This will involve the use of certain concepts that are very specifically associated with literature.

Important Literary Concepts
The Basics
- Plot
- Setting
- Narration/point of view
- Characterization
- Symbol
- Metaphor
- Genre
- Irony/ambiguity

How Can I Learn More?
- There are various handbooks of literary terms available in most libraries.
- There are numerous introductions to literary criticism and theory that are widely available.
- Example: A Handbook to Literature. Harmon/Holman

What Is an Analysis?
An analysis of a literary work may discuss:
- How the various components of an individual work relate to each other.
- How two separate literary works deal with similar concepts or forms.
- How concepts and forms in literary works relate to larger aesthetic, political, social, economic, or religious contexts.

How is Literary Analysis an Argument?
- When writing a literary analysis, you will focus on specific attribute(s) of the text(s).
- When discussing these attributes, you will want to make sure that you are making a specific, arguable point (thesis) about these attributes.
- You will defend this point with reasons and evidence drawn from the text.
Which is the Best Claim?
- *Moby-Dick* is about the problem of evil.
- *Moby-Dick* is boring and pointless.
- *Moby-Dick* is about a big, white whale.
- The use of “whiteness” in *Moby-Dick* illustrates the uncertainty about the meaning of life that Ishmael expresses throughout the novel.

How Do I Support a Claim?
- Examples from the text:
  - Direct quotations
  - Summaries of scenes
  - Paraphrase
- Other critics’ opinions
- Historical and social context
- Always remember to read carefully and highlight useful passages and quotes.

What is a Secondary Source?
- A book or article that discusses the text you are discussing
- A book or article that discusses a theory related to the argument you are making
- A book or article that discusses the social and historical context of the text you are discussing

How Do I Find Secondary Sources?
- MLA International Bibliography
- Dictionary of Literary Biography
- Discipline-specific sources
- Example: America: History and Life for American literature

Integrating Secondary Sources
- When you use secondary sources, be sure to show how they relate to your thesis.
- Don’t overuse any one secondary source, or for that matter, secondary sources in general
- Remember that this is your paper, your argument—the secondary sources are just helping you out.
- Never, never, never plagiarize!

Please reference the Purdue Owl website for ANY questions about writing, researching, citing, etc.

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