A Guide to Writing a Literary Analysis Essay

1. INTRODUCTION: the first paragraph in your essay. It begins creatively in order to catch your reader’s interest, provides essential background about the literary work, and prepares the reader for your major thesis. The introduction must include the author and title of the work as well as an explanation of the theme to be discussed. Other essential background may include setting, an introduction of main characters, etc. The major thesis goes in this paragraph usually at the end. Because the major thesis sometimes sounds tacked on, make special attempts to link it to the sentence that precedes it by building on a key word or idea.

A) Creative Opening/Hook: the beginning sentences of the introduction that catch the reader’s interest. Ways of beginning creatively include the following:

1) A startling fact or bit of information
Example: According to Edwin Marks (1996), historian and author, nearly two hundred citizens were arrested as witches during the Salem witch scare of 1692, and eventually nineteen were hanged, and another was pressed to death (Marks, 1996, p. 65). [In this case, you will need to include this source in your list of references.]

2) A snatch of dialogue between two characters
Example: “It is another thing. You [Frederic Henry] cannot know about it unless you have it.” “Well,” I said. “If I ever get it I will tell you [priest].” (Hemingway 72). With these words, the priest in Ernest Hemingway’s A Farewell to Arms sends the hero, Frederic, in search of the ambiguous “it” in his life.

3) A meaningful quotation (from the book/story you are analyzing or another source)
Example: “To be, or not to be, that is the question” {3.1.57}. This familiar statement expresses the young prince’s moral dilemma in William Shakespeare’s tragedy Hamlet, Prince of Denmark.

4) A universal idea
Example: The terrifying scenes a soldier experiences on the front probably follow him throughout his life—if he manages to survive the war.

5) A rich, vivid description of the setting
Example: Sleepy Maycomb, like other Southern towns, suffers considerably during the Great Depression. Poverty reaches from the privileged families, like the Finches, to the Negroes and “white trash” Ewells, who live on the outskirts of town. Harper Lee paints a vivid picture of life in this humid Alabama town where tempers and bigotry explode into conflict.

B) Thesis: a statement that provides the subject and overall opinion of your essay. For a literary analysis your major thesis must (1) relate to the theme of the work and (2) suggest how this theme is revealed by the author. A good thesis may also suggest the organization of the paper.
Example: Through Paul’s experience behind the lines, at a Russian prisoner of war camp, and especially under bombardment in the trenches, Erich Maria Remarque realistically shows how war dehumanizes a man.

Sometimes a thesis becomes too cumbersome to fit into one sentence. In such cases, you may express the major thesis as two sentences, but unless the literary analysis is longer than four to five pages, the thesis should be handled in a single sentence at the end of the introduction.
Example: In A Tale of Two Cities, Charles Dickens shows the process by which a wasted life can be redeemed. Sidney Carton, through his love for Lucie Manette, is transformed from a hopeless, bitter man into a hero whose life and death have meaning.
II. BODY PARAGRAPHS

A) **Body**: the support paragraphs of your essay. These paragraphs contain supporting example: (concrete detail) and analysis/explanation (commentary) for your topic sentences. Each paragraph in the body includes (1) a topic sentence, (2) textual evidence (a.k.a. quotes from your reading) and commentary (a.k.a. explanation), and (3) a concluding sentence. In its simplest form, each body paragraph is organized as follows: 1. topic sentence; 2. lead-in to textual evidence 1; 3. textual evidence 1; 4. commentary; 5. transition and lead-in to textual evidence 2; 6. textual evidence 2; 7. commentary; 8. concluding or clincher sentence.

1) **Topic Sentence**: the first sentence of a body or support paragraph. It identifies one aspect of the major thesis and states a primary reason why the major thesis is true.

**Example**: When he first appears in the novel, Sidney Carton is a loveless outcast who sees little worth in himself or in others.

2) **Textual Evidence**: a specific example from the work used to provide evidence for your topic sentence. Textual evidence can be a combination of paraphrase and direct quotation from the work.

**Example**: When Carton and Darnay first meet at the tavern, Carlton tells him, “I care for no man on this earth, and no man cares for me” (Dickens, 1859, p. 105).

3) **Commentary**: your explanation and interpretation of the textual evidence. Commentary tells the reader what the author of the text means or how the textual evidence proves the topic sentence. Commentary may include interpretation, analysis, argument, insight, and/or reflection. (Helpful hint: In your body paragraph, you should have twice as much commentary as textual evidence. In other words, for every sentence of textual evidence, you should have at least two sentences of commentary.)

**Example**: Carton makes this statement as if he were excusing his rude behavior to Darnay. Carton, however, is only pretending to be polite, perhaps to amuse himself. With this seemingly off-the-cuff remark, Carton reveals a deeper cynicism and his emotional isolation.

4) **Transitions**: words or phrases that connect or “hook” one idea to the next, both between and within paragraphs. Transition devices include using connecting words as well as repeating key words or using synonyms.

**Examples**: Finally, in the climax... Another example: ... Later in the story... In contrast to this behavior... Not only... but also... Furthermore...

5) **Lead-In**: phrase or sentence that prepares the reader for textual evidence by introducing the speaker, setting, and/or situation.

**Example**: Later, however, when the confident Sidney Carton returns alone to his home, his alienation and unhappiness become apparent: “Climbing into a high chamber in a well of houses, he threw himself down in his clothes on a neglected bed, and its pillow was wet with wasted tears” (Dickens 211).

6) **Clincher/Concluding Sentence**: last sentence of the body paragraph. It concludes the paragraph by tying the textual evidence and commentary back to the thesis.

**Example**: Thus, before Carton experiences love, he is able to convince himself that the world has no meaning.
III. CONCLUSION: last paragraph in your essay. This paragraph should begin by echoing your major thesis without repeating the words exactly. Then, the conclusion should broaden from the thesis statements to answer the “so what?” question your reader may have after reading your essay. The conclusion should do one or more of the following:

1) Reflect on how your essay topic relates to the book as a whole
2) Evaluate how successful the author is in achieving his or her goal or message
3) Give a personal statement about the topic, though the wording should remain formal
4) Make predictions
5) Connect back to your creative opening
6) Give your opinion of the novel’s value or significance

IV. CITING TEXTUAL EVIDENCE WITHIN THE PAPER

PRIMARY SOURCE: The literary work (novel, play, story, poem) to be discussed in an essay.
Example: Steinbeck’s Of Mice and Men Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Tell-tale Heart”

**For most literary analysis papers, you will be using ONLY PRIMARY SOURCES**

SECONDARY SOURCE: Any source (other than the primary source) referred to in the essay. Secondary sources can include critical analyses, biographies of the author, reviews, history books, encyclopedias etc.

When citing primary or secondary sources, follow MLA/APA style for parenthetical documentation and “Works Cited” /“References” page. Your teacher will let you know which style to use.

V. REFERENCES

APA: The References page lists in alphabetical all references to outside sources used in the paper. All entries are double-spaced with a hanging indentation.

APA citations: The first use of a reference is always introduced with the following 1) author’s full name; 2) copyright date—in parenthesis following the author’s name; 3) author’s credentials; 4) title of work; 5) page number where reference occurs. This is in parenthesis at the end of the sentence with the period following.

Second use of a reference: The reference information may be included at the end of the sentence with the following format: Sentence (author’s last name, copyright date, p. #/##).

VI. TONE: The tone of the paper should be formal. This includes any commentary. It also includes the conclusion. All opinions should be stated formally. The awkward use of “one” or “the reader” should also be avoided.

VII. Formatting: The entire paper should follow the following formatting guidelines:

- Font: Times New Roman, 12 pts.
- Double-spaced
- one-inch margins
- Each page (including the title page if that is necessary) should have a header: left justified—a shortened title in all caps; left justified—page numbers. The title page is page 1.
- The title page should include four lines of information centered in the top half of the page. Line 1: Title of paper; Line 2: Student’s name; Line 3: School or institution; Line 4: Class name; Optional Line 5: word count (if required).