

Literary Criticism



Literary criticism allows you to analyze works of literature by engaging with a specific text as well as theories related to that text. The actual process of reading and writing will vary, but this handout outlines basic steps for analyzing and constructing a critical argument that may be used as you tailor your work to your specific audience and assignment.

Prepare to Analyze

Before you begin analyzing a work of literature, it is important to understand the text you will be analyzing as well as your writing assignment. Read the prompt thoroughly, looking for key words such as **compare, contrast, define, discuss, explain, interpret, justify**, etc. Professors will often assign or ask you to choose a specific literary theory to inform your analysis. The literary theory will be used as a lens to interpret the text. Once you are sure you understand the details of the prompt, familiarize yourself with the text. Know the answers to the following questions: Whose point of view is the story told from? What is action of the story? Who are the characters? What is the context (historical, cultural, etc.)? What is the main conflict? Having this information will help you build a framework for the text you will analyze.

Active Reading

Once you have a basic understanding of the work, you will be able to find more meaning in the text. While you are reading, it is helpful to take note of what you find that enhances your understanding of the text. Learning what to look for takes time, so consider the following suggestions to help you notice important details:

- **Symbols:** Symbols are small, reoccurring details that help guide readers to identifying larger themes. You can identify symbols by looking for repetition in an object, color, place, etc.
Example: In *The Great Gatsby*, the narrator repeatedly mentions a green light across the bay. You might take notes such as these: Does the green light symbolize money (since it is green)? Does it symbolize hope (since it is by Daisy's house)? Does it symbolize false idealism (since it leads Gatsby to nothing but loss)?
- **Themes:** Themes are central concepts or main ideas in the text. Identifying themes is crucial to understanding and analyzing a piece of literature. Symbols act as clues to finding larger themes.
Example: Once you have noticed the symbol of the green light across the bay, you can look for how that symbol plays into a larger theme. You could argue that the green light symbolizes money and is therefore part of a consumerism theme, a topic consistently explored in the text.
- **Textual evidence:** Once you have identified symbols and themes, you can work on finding passages to support what you have noticed. Look for key words, phrases, and sentences. Passages will be essential in supporting your claims about the text.
Example: The narrator, Nick Carraway, helps the reader to understand the depth and meaning of Gatsby's wealth: "I saw skins of tigers flaming in his palace on the Grand Canal; I saw him opening a chest of rubies to ease, with their crimson-lighted depths, the gnawings of his broken heart" (67). This passage could be a useful because it provides textual evidence for a specific theme (in this case, wealth and consumerism).

Constructing an Analysis

Putting your ideas into essay form requires planning and organization. The elements of a good analysis include a claim (thesis), evidence, and conclusion.

Making a Claim

Once you have chosen a theoretical lens and read carefully and critically through a work, the next step is to make a claim. This claim will form the thesis, which provides your audience with the purpose, scope, and organization of your essay.

Example Thesis: In F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, the green light across the bay represents Jay Gatsby's desire to relive the past. His obsession with wealth demonstrates his belief that its power will change the past and secure the future; however, it is ultimately this consumerism that destroys him.

Gathering Supporting Evidence

Evidence can be broken down into two categories: primary sources and secondary sources. Each of these is important to a work of literary criticism, though the sources will vary depending on the theoretical lens you use.

- Primary sources include the work of literature that you are examining as well as other first-hand materials. These could include newspapers published at the time, books, plays, or other artifacts or works of art.

Example: For *The Great Gatsby*, you might look at Fitzgerald's other works, newspaper articles from the time about living in New York, or popular songs referenced in the novel.

- Secondary sources include works by other scholars on the topic or work, typically found via academic journals, books, or reputable websites.

Example: For *The Great Gatsby*, you might review academic articles on the influence of jazz on the New York social life or a book about consumerism in the 20's.

Supporting evidence convinces your readers that your claim is valid. Without supporting evidence, your reader may not accept your claim. As you support your claim with primary and secondary sources, readers will understand the value and validity of your argument or interpretation and how it contributes to a larger conversation about the work.

Forming a Conclusion

In the conclusion to a work of literary criticism, consider the broader implications of your analysis or how your analysis could change moral, political, or social viewpoints of society. Avoid merely summarizing the points that you have made throughout the paper; rather, use this space to demonstrate that your interpretation of the work is not only valid, but also useful to society in general. Ask yourself, "therefore, what?"

Common Pitfalls

- **Summary:** Remember to avoid summarizing or merely providing a book review of the text. Your job is to make a significant claim about what the text *does* to the audience, not just what happens in the story.
- **Poor Use of Sources:** Make sure your sources are used as supporting evidence for *your* claims. Your ideas are a valid part of ongoing critical conversations, and you should not simply regurgitate other critics' ideas. When providing incorporating sources, do not assume that the information speaks for itself. Explain to your audience how your sources support your claim.
- **Unfounded Claims:** A personal response to a text is not wrong, but without evidence for an opinion, it is insufficient. Claims must be rooted in the text.
- **Obvious Thesis:** You may have an idea from your first reading of a text, but with research you might find that your idea has already been discussed and could be developed in new ways. If you are at a loss for how to develop your ideas, it is helpful to brainstorm with someone else. The Writing Center is a great place to do that.

For further information on critical theories, visit owl.english.purdue.edu