

# Short Story Analysis

It's easy to understand the objective of an analysis essay once *analysis* is defined and understood as "the separation of a whole into its component parts" ("Analysis"). Basically, by analyzing a story or text, a reader should gain a deeper understanding of the relationships between the parts, or elements, of the story and how these parts shape the story itself. (Think of it like you were taking apart a watch. You look at the pieces and form an idea of how the parts affect the whole.) In this way, reading critically means to evaluate the ideas and meanings in the text and make connections between them based on evidence from the story. Thus, when writing an analytical paper, a student should allow enough time to complete the following, minimal steps:

- Preview, actively read, and review the text. Active reading means underlining and noting connections, patterns, or questions raised in the story while you read. Look for things that catch your attention or seems significant to the story.
- Use these notes and thought-provoking questions—including arguments and connections made—to formulate a thesis statement that will be proven to the reader (see *Thesis Math and Outlining* handout). It may help to ask a single, major question about the story and then answer it using your thesis statement.
- Reexamine thesis for logical reasoning, complexity, and originality.
- Create an outline by organizing examples that support thesis arguments (along with analysis and interpretation of these) into paragraphs.
- Compose a rough draft—following MLA guidelines—including a Works Cited page (see *Making Sense of MLA* handout).
- Revise, revise, revise!
- Edit and proofread.

## Terms/Story Elements to Know

<b>Exposition:</b> Setting and characters introduced?	<b>Characterization:</b> Who are the characters? Describe them, their relationships, connections, worldviews, ideas about themselves, others.
<b>Protagonist:</b> Main character? Character's function and significance?	<b>Antagonist:</b> Character or force working against protagonist?
<b>Flat/Static Character(s):</b> Which characters stay the same throughout the story?	<b>Round/ Dynamic Character(s):</b> Which characters learn, grow, change?
<b>Plot (Sequence of Events):</b> What happens first? Next? After that? Finally?	<b>Setting:</b> Where and when does the story occur?
<b>Conflict (Problem):</b> What is the driving force (cause) behind the plot?	<b>Foreshadowing/Suspense/ Rising Action:</b> What will happen? How do you know? Effects?
<b>Climax (Crisis):</b> What is the most exciting part of the story? When do the protagonist and antagonist converge?	<b>Resolution (Denouement):</b> How are the "loose ends" of the story finally tied up? How is the conflict finally resolved?
<b>Theme (Claim, Message, Moral):</b> What is the author's message to the audience? What should readers learn from the story?	<b>Point of View (Narrator):</b> Who is telling the story? Is the narrator: reliable, unreliable, omniscient, objective, neutral?
<b>Language (Figurative Devices, Style, Tone, Mood):</b> How is the author's language or word choice unique? Describe the author's feelings regarding characters, setting, plot.	<b>Irony (Verbal, Situational, Dramatic):</b> What discrepancies or contradictions are present in the story and its characters?
<b>Symbolism/Allusion:</b> <b>S:</b> What objects or actions contain hidden or implied meanings? <b>A:</b> Does the author refer to historical events? Other texts?	<b>Imagery:</b> What words, phrases, patterns describe the characters' experiences as observed through their senses?

## Content: What to Say (or Not)

Adapted from the Roane State Community College (RSCC) Online Writing Lab:

- Never avoid saying the obvious: it's usually true. But don't spend a lot of time on it—acknowledge its obviousness, perhaps by a word like "Clearly, . . ." Then move on to something less obvious.
- An ideal paper is one in which the writer discovers something and shares his or her pleasure in the discovery with a reader. The discovery may be an interpretation of a challenging story or poem (or portion thereof), or it may just be the discovery of what you really think about something or other. ("How do I know what I think until I see what I've said," Churchill is supposed to have said.) To discover your own considered opinion or valuation of the work you're writing about is a satisfying outcome to a paper.

- Avoid apologizing for what you say. It goes without saying that the views and interpretations you offer are yours, doesn't it? So there's no need for such boring and weak phrases as "It seems to me" or "In my opinion."
- The only kind of **originality** that matters at all is finding the source of your ideas and feelings within you: being true to that origin. In a class paper, it doesn't in the least matter if what you say has been said before. In any case, it's not been said in the same way, and the study of literature should surely have brought home to you that the way of saying something is part of its meaning.
- Use concepts and **terms** you've worked with (characterization, plot, climax, symbolism, theme, etc.). But remember, it's best to use them only when they pay off, not automatically. Paraphrase (using your own words to explain an idea from one of your sources), for example, should be used selectively, when a line or sentence has a tricky meaning or a meaning you're uncertain of but want to spell out as best you can.
- In writing about fiction, you will find more interesting things to say if you focus on **characterization rather than characters**. Writing about characters too often means writing as though they were real people, speculating about what happened before or after the action of the book or story, and other imponderables like that. Characters in a work of fiction are **not** real people but rather careful constructs that resemble real people. Focusing on *characterization* means studying how the writer presents the character—what selection of detail is used, what mixture of direct "showing" to indirect "telling" is present, what implied valuations are being made, and the like.
- Rule of thumb: when you quote supporting passages from the text being discussed, never let the quotation just lie there on the page inertly; **make use of it; put it to work**; point to specific features or details or words in it; say what you see, what it is that makes you want to let the reader have it before him or her. It's no good (in a class paper) saying to yourself that the reader can surely work out the point for himself or herself: in this context, it's up to you to do the work. After all, one of your purposes is to persuade your instructor/reader that you yourself can see the meaning.
- **Accuracy** in quoting is crucially important! Change nothing from your source without showing that you're doing so—not spelling, not capitalization, not line breaks, not paragraphing. And your quotations **must fit into your own sentence in a way that makes sense**. This point is important and often causes trouble.
- **Avoid plot summary for its own sake**. Your reader should be familiar with the plot.
- Use past tense to talk about biographical facts or publication data but **present tense** to talk about what goes on in a work of fiction or poetry. Example: "Plath's *Ariel* was published after her death, but the poems show many premonitions of disaster to come."

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