

TIPS FOR DOING A LITERARY ANALYSIS

KEEP IN MIND THAT LITERARY ANALYSES ARE ESSENTIALLY ARGUMENTS FOR A PARTICULAR INTERPRETATION OF A WORK. TO PRESENT A GOOD ARGUMENT IN YOUR ESSAY YOU MUST GIVE A FULL AND CLEAR EXPLANATION OF THE POINTS YOU ARE MAKING AND YOU MUST SUPPORT YOUR CLAIMS WITH GOOD EVIDENCE.

I. GOOD EVIDENCE; WHAT IT IS

There are two kinds of relevant evidence when doing literary analysis; evidence from primary sources and evidence from secondary sources.

- A. PRIMARY SOURCES are the works of literature themselves and evidence from primary sources is usually more valuable and persuasive than that from other sources. Anything from your primary source is evidence. The most common evidence is an actual quotation from the work but you may also refer to details of plot, setting, character description and conflicts in the work.
- B. SECONDARY SOURCES are facts and opinions from outside the work. Facts about the author's life and times, and opinions given on the author's work by literary critics are all considered secondary source materials. This secondary material can be very useful in helping you formulate your own opinions but you should draw your basic evidence from the work itself.

II. GOOD EVIDENCE; HOW TO FIND IT

- A. PRIMARY SOURCES: Your job as the writer of a literary analysis is to convince your readers that the points you are making are valid. It is possible to argue for different interpretations of a novel, poem or play depending on the evidence chosen. You must search for the evidence that supports your particular idea of what the work is about. To do this you must *read the work carefully*. It is very useful to take notes on what you read. Here are some tips on taking your notes:
 - 1. Keep note cards on which you indicate pages where important themes or ideas are discussed or dramatized. Important ideas are usually the ones that reappear frequently in the work.
 - 2. You may also want to have note cards for each major character on which you list the pages where important (revealing) speeches are made or actions taken.
 - 3. When you have finished the work, you can then review all the pertinent data which you have noted on your cards. This will save you time looking for key passages to support your arguments as you write your essay, and will give you an easy way to review the important actions and ideas you have just read.

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4. If you want to go one step further, use large note cards and include actual quotations from the work. This way you will have a fuller idea of what is happening on each of the pages you noted as being important.

B. **SECONDARY SOURCES:** Finding them in the library

1. **BOOKS:** Use the library catalog to find books about the author. These are examples of the secondary sources discussed above. To find books about an author, use either of the catalog's SUBJECT options.
2. **ARTICLES IN MAGAZINES:** From the library's menu select **Magazine Articles and Other Databases**. Next select **InfoTrac - Expanded Academic ASAP**. Do a search in this database on the name of the author(s) you are studying.
3. **ESSAYS:** Use the **Literature Resource Center**, an online database, to locate essays from books and excerpts from journal articles. The **Essay and General Literature Index**, a print source, will lead you to critical essays written about an author and/or individual works by that author. Ask at the reference desk for more information.

III. CHOOSING A GOOD TOPIC

- A. Pick something thought-provoking. A good topic is one which most readers could not answer after reading the work once; it is one that requires review and study of the work.
- B. Pick something worth considering. Would an analysis of your topic enhance a reader's understanding of the work's main ideas?
- C. Pick a topic that can be treated adequately within the limits of your assignment. A topic such as "the role of women in the novels of Jane Austen" would be too broad for a 10 page paper but "the role of the mother in *Pride and Prejudice*" would be manageable.

IV. BOOKS TO HELP YOU WRITE ESSAYS ABOUT LITERATURE

The following books are available at the RESERVE DESK. You may also want to consult the board of LIBRARY INSTRUCTION HANDOUTS at the front of the Reserve Desk where you will find aides for creating bibliographies, lists of works cited, footnotes, etc.

Barnet, Sylvan. *A Short Guide to Writing About Literature*.
Boston: Little, Brown, 1985. PE/1479/.C7/B3/1985

Biddle, Authur. *Reading, Writing, and the Study of Literature*.
New York: Random House, 1989. PE/1479/.C7/B54/1989

Griffith, Kelley. *Writing Essays About Literature*.
New York: Harcourt, 1981. PN/83/.G72/1994