

Discovering Evidence for a Literary Analysis Essay

This handout is designed to help you discover evidence to support an argument in a literary analysis assignment by using the skill of *close reading* to produce an *explication* of a literary text. This lesson discusses how the elements of literature work together to create meaning; you will find a model analysis of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and four activities to sharpen your literary analysis skills and prepare you to write a paragraph of literary analysis. Exploring how literature is put together and how it works helps us to understand, appreciate, and enjoy it more.

How Do I Prepare to Analyze?

As you read the text in preparation to write your essay, read actively; ask yourself questions about the text. Jot down your observations in a notebook or computer file. What parts of the text are interesting to you? What is the main conflict? What is the tone? Who is the narrator? Or in poetry, who is the speaker? What do we know about the characters or speaker from reading the work? What can we infer? What is the main idea of the whole work? When your professor provides an essay prompt, reread the text (or the parts of the text that you find relevant) with the prompt questions in mind; look for quotes and make observations that could be useful in your discussion of the text. Reading actively prepares you to analyze the text in greater detail when you are composing your essay.

Activity 1: Active Reading

Summarize the piece that you will analyze. Identify key themes in your summary; if you have a writing prompt for your literary analysis essay, identify the aspects of the piece that speak to the prompt questions. Your summary will not necessarily form part of your essay, but it is an important step in the writing process as it should help you focus and organize your thoughts.

What is Literary Analysis?

An analysis studies something in detail, breaking that thing down to its components to understand their functions and the relationship among the components. Literature, of course, is creative or artistic writing like stories, novels, poems, and the like.

So a **literary analysis** breaks down a work of literature to identify its elements and examine the way they work together, thus discussing or interpreting the work. Professors often require students to organize their analysis of a text in a **literary analysis essay**, which may be either a *critical essay* or an *explication essay*. A *critical essay* often examines a text through an ideological lens to throw light on some aspect of the meaning of the text related to the ideology in question, while an *explication essay* analyzes how the formal components contribute to the

meaning of a literary work. This handout focuses on how to write an explication essay because explication is the foundation for literary analysis, whether the essay be a critical argument or an explication.

Literary analysis begins with a study of form and effect.

How Do I Study Form?

Analyzing literature requires that we break it down to understand how it is built: its components, their functions, and the relationship among the components. We must understand its form.

Before we begin analyzing *The Great Gatsby*, let us consider the definition of *form* in literature. The form of a physical object is the structure of the object as distinguished from its material. The material of the Eiffel Tower is iron, and its form is the infamous structure that towers over Paris; in literature, language is the material, and the *form* is found in the “structures” an author creates in a text with the language. These structures include the techniques writers use to shape language into a meaningful experience: plot, figurative language, imagery, and countless others. Whereas normally we read for *what* a text says, when we read for form, we read for *how* the text says it and how that affects the meaning of the text. The following table contains some techniques authors use to structure their work.

<i>Poetry</i>	<i>Narrative (Stories, Novels, and Plays)</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● diction—the word choice; important for both its denotation and connotation ● figurative language—non-literal use of language: simile, metaphor, hyperbole, etc. ● dramatic situation—the underlying conflict and resolution of a poem ● speaker—the character who speaks in the poem (not the author) ● indeterminacy—the meanings (of a word, an image, or a line) are uncertain ● imagery—detailed sensory descriptions that encourage the reader to imagine what is described ● sound devices—rhyme, alliteration, rhythm, etc.; in poetry, sound devices carry the movement and music of the poem, and they, therefore, affect the meaning significantly. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● diction—the word choice; important for both its denotation and connotation ● figurative language—non-literal use of language; simile, metaphor, hyperbole, etc. ● plot—the order of events in which the story is told ● point of view—the perspective from which the story is told, which may be that of a character in the story or that of an outside narrator ● characterization—the construction of the personalities and identities of the characters ● indeterminacy—the parts of the story that are uncertain ● imagery—detailed sensory descriptions that encourage the reader to imagine what is described ● sound devices—more central to poetry, but can also be important in prose; these include rhyme, alliteration, consonance, assonance, meter, rhythm, onomatopoeia, among others.

The table above is by no means an exhaustive list. It is only meant to give you an idea of what you can keep your eye out for as you read through the work that you will analyze.

Activity 2: Identifying Form

Choose an excerpt from the work you will discuss that uses particularly fresh or engaging language. What about the language do you find engaging? Do any of the formal elements from the above chart appear? Take notes on your observations, and discuss them with your tutor. If you cannot choose a part of the text at the moment, you can use the following excerpt from *Great Gatsby*, in which Nick is walking alone in the streets, for this exercise.

Excerpt from The Great Gatsby

Again at eight o'clock, when the dark lanes of the Forties were lined five deep with throbbing taxicabs, for the theater district, I felt a sinking in my heart. Forms leaned together in the taxis as they waited, and voices sang, and there was laughter from unheard jokes, and lighted cigarettes outlined unintelligible gestures inside. Imagining that I, too, was hurrying toward gayety and sharing their intimate excitement, I wished them well. ~F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*

When a formal element catches your eye, you must be ready to explain its significance. In a moment, we will take a closer look at the excerpt from *The Great Gatsby* together, trying to find significance in the form, but first, let's find our bearings in the story.

What Is the Role of Historical Context?

The Great Gatsby is set in New York in the Roaring Twenties, a period following World War I and coinciding with Prohibition; the youth of this period were notorious for their riotous partying and drinking. The narrator, Nick, is a restless World War I veteran and bachelor entering his thirties who has moved far away from home to try to make it rich in the 1920s economic boom by investing in the stock market. Nick narrates the story, focusing on the affair between Gatsby and Daisy.

Given this historical context, an analysis of Nick's narrative mood throughout *The Great Gatsby* may claim that the text critiques the culture of America in that time, and such a claim must be supported with evidence from the text. While such an argument would supplement textual analysis with relevant historical material, the argument is still grounded in a study of the text itself, of its forms and their effects.

How Do I Study Effect?

As your study form, you will no doubt start noticing how the different formal elements interact within the frame of the story: note that the summary of plot you just read in the section on historical context already starts to frame our analysis of the specific elements that shape the paragraph. We isolate formal elements through analysis, but ultimately we need to understand how they work together. As we examine a passage, we can choose to focus our observations on any formal element that stands out. For example, if we attend to the diction of the passage, we start to notice how word choice creates effects. The phrase “throbbing taxicabs” is an example of particularly fresh word choice.

<i>Form</i>	<i>Effect</i>
Diction: “throbbing taxicabs”	The word “throbbing” conveys the hectic activity of the Roaring Twenties flapper scene while also suggesting that there is underlying pain or injury undermining all the fun and partying.

Continuing our study of specific formal choices, we might next consider how imagery works.

<i>Form</i>	<i>Effect</i>
Imagery: “Forms leaned together in the taxis as they waited, and voices sang, and there was laughter from unheard jokes, and lighted cigarettes outlined unintelligible gestures inside.”	The imagery suggests distance and estrangement. Nick does not see people leaning together; he sees only “forms.” Moreover, there is laughter, but he does not hear the jokes. Cigarettes, the source of light, are dim and distant enough that Nick cannot understand the gestures they outline.

After you recognize the effect that the form of a work has on the reader, you should seek to explain how the effects that the passage produces are related to its significance in the work as a whole, thus explaining how it contributes to the overall meaning of the text.

Activity 3: Describing Effect

Examine the excerpt that you chose in the first activity. What effects do the formal elements produce in the passage? How does the form produce effects? Discuss your ideas with your tutor, and write down your conclusions.

How Do I Interpret Meaning?

How does meaning emerge from the relationship between form and effect that we observed above? It can do so in a variety of ways. A literary analysis will often connect the way that the different formal elements interact and make an argument about the key ideas, or *themes*, a work conveys. Themes are the overall meaning of a work of literature; we can call the meaningfulness

of a formal element and the effect it produces its *thematic significance*. We interpret themes as we begin to notice patterns in the forms and the effects we have analyzed. For instance, we can elaborate upon the diction analysis we completed earlier.

<i>Form</i>	<i>Effect</i>	<i>Meaning</i>
Diction: “throbbing taxicabs”	The word “throbbing” conveys the hectic activity of the Roaring Twenties flapper scene while also suggesting that there is underlying pain or injury undermining all the fun and partying that occurs.	The idea of pain in the midst of celebration permeates the whole novel, which may be a characteristic of life in post WWI America that Nick is highlighting; even the protagonist of the novel, Gatsby, throws enormous parties but suffers inwardly because Daisy, his love, does not attend them and does not love him because of them.

Notice that in the meaning box, we observed that the mood of the narrator may be related to historical influences. We can analyze the imagery similarly.

<i>Form</i>	<i>Effect</i>	<i>Meaning</i>
Imagery: “Forms leaned together in the taxis as they waited, and voices sang, and there was laughter from unheard jokes, and lighted cigarettes outlined unintelligible gestures inside.”	The imagery suggests distance and estrangement. Nick does not see people leaning together; he sees only “forms,” shapes. Moreover, there is laughter, but he does not hear the jokes. Cigarettes are the source of light, and they are dim and distant enough that Nick cannot understand the gestures they outline.	Throughout the novel, people only know one another as shapes, and they only get to know one another dimly. There is an impersonal nature to all of the relationships in the novel, as further analysis of key friendships and love relationships reveals.

Notice that in the meaning box for the imagery analysis, we have encountered a pattern, which could guide us as we continue to analyze the text to build the literary analysis essay.

Activity 4: Interpreting Meaning

Return to the formal elements and their effects as analyzed in the second activity. How does each effect produce meaning in the text? How do the effects produce your experience of the text as a reader? What ideas does the text seem to promote through the effects of its form?

Activity 5: Writing an Explication Paragraph

The following paragraph employs observations on form, effect, and meaning to provide a unified analysis of the passage of the novel that we have been studying. Using the observations that you have gathered by working through this handout, write your own explication paragraph for your literary analysis essay. Discuss it with your tutor to find its strengths as well as its weaknesses.

Model Explication Paragraph

As Nick finds himself walking alone in the street, his profound loneliness is manifested through his narration. Consider his description of strangers out with their friends: “Forms leaned together in the taxis as they waited, and voices sang, and there was laughter from unheard jokes, and lighted cigarettes outlined unintelligible gestures inside.” The imagery and diction suggest distance and estrangement, for Nick uses the word *forms*, which denotes shapes and conveys a feeling of disconnect, rather than the word *people*. The cigarettes, the source of light, are dim and distant enough that Nick cannot understand the gestures that they outline, which again suggests inefficient communication, a disconnect. Nick’s own life is characterized by separation and broken communication, as his short-lived romantic involvement with Jordan Baker illustrates. And, of course, Nick also sees that brokenness in both Daisy’s affair with Gatsby and his marriage to Tom.

References

Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. New York: Collier Books, 1992.

Lunsford, Andrea. *The Everyday Writer*. 5th Edition. Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2013. Print.