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## *Writing Analytical & Critical Papers about Imaginative Literature*

An **analysis** assignment calls for a close reading of one piece of writing. The purpose of this assignment is for you to use details from the writing to support an **interpretation** you make of that particular piece of writing. A **critical analysis** contains some **assessment** of whether or not the author achieves what you identify as his or her intended purpose for writing the piece. Writing critically does not necessarily mean judging an author's work harshly. It means looking closely at the writing and determining how the various components of the piece work together, or do not work together, to accomplish the author's purpose. Thinking about what you read takes time, so when completing such assignments, remember to allow yourself enough time for your reactions to come into clear focus.

**Analyzing** a piece of literature does not mean merely looking at what is being said in the piece. Imaginative literature goes beyond the communication of information; it also presents images, actions, events, emotions, and feelings which allow you, the reader, to participate to some degree in experiences the writer creates for you.

### **MAKE SURE YOU MEET THE SPECIFIC REQUIREMENTS OF YOUR INSTRUCTOR.**

**Three major purposes** for writing a critical paper about imaginative literature have been identified by Hans P. Guth in *The Writer's Agenda* (1989). These purposes may exist alone or in combination as the basis for a critical paper assignment.

1. **Appreciation:** Offer your comments about your own responses to the piece and about how these responses affect your thinking or your feelings. You seek to help your audience -- other readers -- respond more fully to a piece of literature.
2. **Interpretation:** Explain how the piece works, what it says. You might tell what an author means by a particular line, phrase, or sentence; or what something in the piece might symbolize; or what the underlying meaning of a scene or occurrence might be. You do not attempt to reduce the piece to a simple moral about what one should or should not do in order to live a better life. Instead, you seek to interpret images and events created by the author. Your purpose (in one instance) is to help your audience more fully appreciate the piece of literature.
3. **Evaluation:** Identify what you consider to be good or what you identify as shoddy or second rate. You do not merely state personal likes or dislikes. Instead, you set up specific criteria (spelled out or implied) for what should exist in the piece and clearly explain how the details in the piece meet, or do not meet, those criteria. You may, for instance, indicate how the piece merely caters to prejudice, distorts reality, or offers a simplistic solution to an existing problem.

## WRITING THE CRITICAL PAPER

**Show evidence of close, careful reading.** Your reader should recognize clearly that you have read the text. Include details from the piece about images, characters, and events. Use actual quotations from the piece which illustrate what you are saying about the piece.

**Respond fully to the language of literature.** Writers of imaginative literature use language in more meaningful and imaginative ways than other writers. Their language is rich in shades of meaning, in connotations, overtones, and associations. They use figures of speech involving unusual comparisons that sometimes seem surprising or bold. For example:

A **similie** is a comparison using the words *like* or *as*:  
*Her eyes shone like stars.*

A **metaphor** is a comparison that is implied and suggests that one thing *is* actually another:  
*My heart was a runaway train careening dizzily around a very sharp corner.*

**Go beyond a mere plot summary.** If you merely summarize the plot, you tell what happens but not *why* it happens or what it *means*. You will probably need to include some elements of summary -- to refresh the reader's memory or to inform readers who have not read the piece -- but summary should not be the major focus of your paper.

**Support your judgments.** Defend what you claim about the piece of literature by bringing in specific details from the piece that caused you to have the response you had.

**Respond to the overall pattern of the piece of literature.** Consider the way in which the overall pattern is developed throughout the piece. As you read an imaginative piece of literature, you live through what happens as the writer creates the experience for you. Do not focus on one small aspect of the piece that does not clearly contribute to the overall pattern.

## FOCUSING THE CRITICAL PAPER

**Use one of the elements of literature to focus your paper.** These elements include:

**Image** -- You might write a critical paper about a particularly striking visual image created by the writer.

**Character** -- You might focus on one major character, finding clues about how and why the character thinks and acts. You might focus on the character's conflicting motives or divided loyalties, bringing in references to different parts of the story which contribute to your understanding of the character.

**Symbol** -- You might write a paper tracing the role of a symbol that is central to the work as a whole. A symbol is an object having a meaning beyond itself, such as the flag, the cross, or the dove of peace. In such a paper, you look at the work as a whole, noting how specific parts of the piece contribute to your understanding of the full meaning of the symbol.

**Conflict** -- You might write a paper explaining the conflict evident in the piece between opposing forces. You might identify the *protagonist*, or main character; the *antagonist*, or character who provides the counterpoint; and the eventual *resolution* of the conflict as played out in the piece.

Some pieces of literature involve an *internal conflict* occurring in a single individual listening to conflicting *voices* within his or her own conscience.

**Theme --** You might write a paper focusing on an underlying theme which unifies the work as a whole. A true theme is a statement about the way things are, about the condition of humankind here on earth, about something that is true about human life. It is not simply a lesson that can be learned from the piece of literature.

**Terms often found in critical papers about imaginative literature:** persona, point of view, allusion, image, metaphor, symbol, meter, stanza, personification, theme, free verse, plot, tragedy, tragic flaw, hubris, didactic, allegory, irony, parody, satire, stream of consciousness.

**The guidelines in this handout are *general* guidelines only. Your teacher will have very specific requirements for your assignment that may differ in some ways from these guidelines. Be sure to read your syllabus and assignment handouts carefully for specific instructions concerning the paper you have been assigned. Also, note carefully what your teacher says in class about the assignment and be sure to ask questions about what you do not understand.**

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*Created by Mary Jo Pride—Updated May 2008*

*Work Cited:*

*Guth, Hans P. The Writer's Agenda: The Wadsworth Writer's Guide and Handbook. Belmont, CA, 1989.*

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