

Thirteen Steps toward a Successful Literary Analysis

1. Choosing a topic. The most fruitful topics for a literary essay are about what the author was trying to say or do in a whole work or in some part or aspect of it. By "parts" I mean scenes in a play, episodes or chapters in a novel, the roles played by individual characters or sets of characters. By "aspect" I mean themes, style, metrical and stanzaic arrangements, techniques (plotting, mode of characterization, use of figurative language), and so on. It is almost impossible to write a good essay without considering the genre the work belongs to and the general expectations that pertain to that genre as well as to the parts or aspects of the work you have chosen to analyze.

2. Arriving at a thesis. An arresting thesis is one that tells us something unexpected about the subject in question. If you don't have such a thesis in hand, perhaps you should approach the essay as seeking the answer to an interesting question. In The Wizard of Oz, what is the function of the dog Toto? In King Lear, why does Cordelia have to die?

3. Choosing a title. An informative, interesting, or amusing title will incite your readers' interest, whereas one that is banal, dryly technical, vulgar, or silly will accelerate your essay to the wastebasket. One of my favorite student titles from recent years was coined by Amber Taylor (CMC '02) for her paper on courtship in *Pride and Prejudice*. She called it "The Rules of Engagement." This title was regrettably stolen by Hollywood a couple of years later, and it has had nine lives since then, but it was much wittier applied to an essay about Jane Austen's love-comedy than to a war movie.

4. Beginning. The first sentence of your essay is the first step in your relationship with the reader, and there are almost as many ways to begin an essay as there are to begin personal relationship. Some essays start with a smile and a shake of the hand, others with a snarl and a punch in the nose. If you have a shocking thesis to present—"In spite of all the apparent evidence and centuries of rumor to the contrary, the country known as France does not exist"—then by all means lead with a right cross. If not, it might be better to engage the reader more gently, perhaps with an intriguing detail—"The world associates Kipling with India, a country he never saw after the age of twenty-four."

Above all, do not begin by putting the reader to sleep with a fact that everybody knows, a tedious truism like "Love is a powerful emotion" or "Shakespeare is a great writer." *Take the obvious for granted!* Dig into the subject from the beginning, making use of your own reading, research, observation, and analysis. Would you rather read an essay that starts, "*Hamlet* is often considered Shakespeare's finest play" or an essay that starts, "*Hamlet* begins at night, and in the cold"?

5. Define your terms. In literary studies, there are certain terms whose meaning we generally take for granted, terms like *plot*, *tone*, *irony*, *tragedy*,

romance. You need not explain them every time you use them, but considering their definitions may help you use them well. If you go beyond basic literary terms or introduce technical terms from other disciplines, be sure to define them.

6. Support your analysis, then defend it. The first task you must undertake after choosing a subject is finding the key portions of the work that support your argument. There is no substitute for detailed reference to the text. But paying attention only to the details that support your thesis will produce a one-sided argument. You must also look for counter-evidence. Any good literary analysis will take account of as much of the apparent counter-evidence as possible. Are there lines, passages, scenes, or elements of the story that seem to resist your argument? You must explain why they do not undermine it or how they lead you to qualify it. This is the best part of most good papers. Also, what other natural objections might come into your readers' minds as they encounter your arguments? Now is the time to confront them. Are there any other reasonable answers, besides yours, to the questions you've raised?

7. Subordinate evidence to argument and avoid summary at all costs! Evidence comes in two forms—live facts and dead facts. Live facts are facts that capture our interest in themselves. They can be introduced anytime. You can begin your paper with one: "Among all of Homer's heroes, only Achilles performs human sacrifice." This fact leads to a world of questions. Sometimes a fact can come alive just because you've cited it. "Charles Dickens was a very rich man"—yes, we knew that, but how are you going to make this relevant in an essay about Hard Times? This is one way of engaging your reader's interest.

Dead facts, by contrast, are things we already know or, if we don't, they will not surprise us when we do. Dead facts can come alive, but only when you subordinate them properly to your analytic thesis. In literary criticism, the basic details of situation and plot are the dearest of facts, and they can only be revived through embedding in support of an analytic point. You can tell us that Hamlet is the Prince of Denmark, but only if you've set the scene to make it work.

8. Make your quotations count. There is no need to quote a phrase or passage just to verify what you are claiming about your text. For that, simple citation is enough. Quote when seeing the words that were actually used helps your analysis, and if you quote a substantial passage, especially in a block quotation, be sure to provide a substantial analysis of it. Before you write about a quotation, consider not only what is being said but the way it is being said—the diction, the tone, the use of metaphors and other imagery. Who is saying what, and to whom? Why this? Why here? Why now? Is this way of using language exceptional or typical for the character in question? Is it typical of the author? The answers to some of these questions may be useful in making your case. Often a thoroughgoing analysis of an important passage can provide enough material for an entire essay.

As for quoting the words of critics or other sources, do so only when they've said something so well you can't better it, or when they've said something so foolish or unexpected that your reader may not believe you if you don't put it there on the page.

9. Critique the critics. One way to give your essay instant relevance is to take issue with what someone else has said about the topic. On any well-known author you can find not only books in the library but dozens of journal articles listed on-line in the MLA Bibliography. Reading some of them will provide you with helpful background information and give you a sense of how the work you've chosen is typically read. Of course, all you learn from them must be properly cited in your notes.

The danger of going to the library is that what you learn there will dominate your approach to your topic. Therefore, it is essential to read the critics critically. They are most useful to you when you challenge them. Ask yourself, what is it that all these authors seem to agree upon? Can I undermine any of their common assumptions or conclusions, or find a way of qualifying them to a significant degree? What kind of evidence do they use? Is it reliable and appropriate?

10. Be responsive to success and failure. Which elements of the line, scene, or work you are analyzing make it powerful, and why? Which elements are obstacles to its success? This couplet was written by Auden: "And the living nations wait,/each sequestered in its hate." Which is the most striking word? "Sequestered"? Is this a metaphor? What does it mean for a "nation" to be "sequestered" in hate? Why does Auden mention that the nations are "living" nations? Aren't all nations alive? Is it a failing for Auden to mention this seemingly too obvious fact in a poem? Or is there something more to it?

11. Consider the counterfactual. When evaluating the meaning or the artistic effect of an author's choice—of words, of characters, of a turn of events—ask yourself how the passage, the scene, or the work in question would have been different had the author chosen otherwise. What if he or she had picked a different word, a different combination of characters on the stage, or a different resolution of the plot. What would *Hamlet* be like without Polonius or *Pride and Prejudice* without Lydia? What if Cordelia had lived? How else could Romeo have said "A rose is a rose is a rose"?

12. Consider the point. A literary work is much more than a message, but it is still a message. It has a point. Once you've come to an idea of what the work is saying, it's almost always rewarding to ask, *In what context would this be a meaningful or important statement? Who would disagree with it? What views would this one exclude? Which opponent is the author aiming at?* This leads easily to the next question—Does the work include a representation of ways of thinking different from the author's or does it leave the alternatives to be supplied by the reader?

13. End with a bang, not a whimper. At the end of your essay, don't merely summarize what you've said but tell the reader why it is significant. Remember, your reader is always ready with a *So-What?* So, what difference does it make in our understanding of the work in question to have seen what you have seen? What are the limits of your accomplishment? What might the next question be?

The conclusion of an essay should not belabor what is by now obvious. It should sharpen the essay's point or expand its focus. Does what you've said about *Oedipus the King* have implications for other Greek tragedies? For tragedy as a genre? For Greek culture as a whole? For literary works in general? Most of the time, the sharpest implications will be for a category that's broader than the one you've written about but still close to it. It's usually more impressive if you can generalize from *Oedipus the King* to other plays by Sophocles than to, say, perennial human nature.