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WRITING ABOUT LITERATURE

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Does the idea of writing a **literary analysis** make you anxious? If it does, we'd like to reassure you that in some ways writing a literary analysis is easier than writing other kinds of essays. For one thing, you don't have to root around, trying to figure out what you want to accomplish: Your purpose in any literary analysis is simply to share with readers some insights about an aspect of a poem, play, story, or novel.[1] Second, in a literary analysis, your thesis and supporting evidence grow directly out of your reading of the text. All you have to do is select the textual evidence that supports your thesis.

By examining both *what* the author says and *how* he or she expresses it, you increase your readers' understanding and appreciation of the work. And, of course, literary analysis rewards you as well. Close textual analysis develops your ability to think critically and independently. Studying literature also strengthens your own writing. As you examine literary works, you become familiar with the strategies that skilled writers use to convey meaning with eloquence and power.

[1]For the sake of simplifying a complex subject, we discuss literary analysis as though it focuses on a single work. In practice, though, a literary analysis often examines two or more works.

Finally, since literature deals with the largest, most timeless issues, literary analysis is one way to learn more about yourself, others, and life in general.

ELEMENTS OF LITERARY WORKS

Before you can analyze a literary text, you need to become familiar with literature's key elements. The following list of literary terms will help you understand what to look for when reading and writing about literature.

Literary Terms

Theme: a work's controlling idea, the main issue the work addresses (for example, loyalty to an individual versus loyalty to a cause; the destructive power of a lie). Most literary analyses deal with theme, even if the analysis focuses on the methods by which that theme is conveyed.

Plot: the series of events that occurs within the work. Typically, plays and stories hinge on plot much more heavily than poetry, which is often constructed around images and ideas rather than actions.

Structure: a work's form, as determined by plot construction, act and scene divisions, stanza and line breaks, repeated images, patterns of meter and rhyme, and other elements that create discernible patterns. (See also *image, meter, rhyme,* and *stanza.*)

Setting: the time and place in which events unfold (the present, on a hot New York City subway car; a nineteenth-century sailing vessel in the South Pacific).

Character: an individual within a poem, play, story, or novel (Tom Sawyer, Ophelia, Oliver Twist, Bigger Thomas).

Characterization: the way in which the author develops an individual within the work.

Conflict: a struggle between individuals, between an individual and some social or environmental force, or within an individual.

Climax: the most dramatic point in the action, usually near the end of a work and usually involving the resolution of conflict.

Foreshadowing: hints, within the work, of events to come.

Narrator or **speaker:** the individual in the work who relates the story. It's important to remember that the narrator is not the same as the author. The opening of Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* makes this distinction especially clear: "You don't know me, without you have read a book by the name of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer,* but that ain't no matter. That book was made by Mr. Mark Twain, and he told the truth, mainly." A poorly educated boy named Huck Finn is the narrator; it is *his* captivating but ungrammatical voice that we hear. In contrast, Twain, the author, was a sophisticated middle-aged man whose command of the language was impeccable.

Point of view: the perspective from which a story is told. In the **first-person** (*I*) point of view, the narrator tells the story as he or she experienced it ("*I* saw the

bird flap its wings"). The first-person narrator either participates in or observes the action. In the **third-person** point of view, the narrator tells the story the way someone else experienced it ("*Dave* saw the bird flap its wings"). The third-person narrator is not involved in the action. He or she may simply report outwardly observable behavior or events, enter the mind of only one character, or enter the minds of several characters. Such a third-person narrator may be *omniscient* (all-knowing) or have only *limited knowledge* of characters and events.

Irony: a discrepancy or incongruity of some kind. *Verbal irony,* which is often tongue-in-cheek, involves a discrepancy between the literal words and what is actually meant ("Here's some news that will make you sad. You received the highest grade in the course"). If the ironic comment is designed to be hurtful or insulting, it qualifies as *sarcasm* ("Congratulations! You failed the final exam"). In *dramatic irony,* the discrepancy is between what the speaker says and what the author means or what the audience knows. The wider the gap between the speaker's words and what can be inferred about the author's attitudes and values, the more ironic the point of view.

Satire: ridicule (either harsh or gentle) of vice or folly, with the purpose of developing awareness—even bringing about reform. Besides using wit, satire often employs irony to attack absurdity, injustice, and evil.

Figure of speech: a non-literal comparison of dissimilar things. The most common figures of speech are **similes,** which use the word *like* or *as* ("*Like* a lightning bolt, the hawk streaked across the sky"); **metaphors,** which state or imply that one thing *is* another ("All the world's a stage"); and **personification,** which gives human attributes to something nonhuman ("The angry clouds unleashed their fury").

Image: a short, vivid description that creates a strong sensory impression ("A black flag writhed in the wind").

Imagery: a combination of images.

Symbol: an object, place, characteristic, or phenomenon that suggests one or more things (usually abstract) in addition to itself (rain as mourning; a lost wedding ring as betrayal). Usually, though, symbols don't convey meaning in pat, unambiguous ways. Rain, for example, may suggest purification as well as mourning; a lost wedding ring may suggest a life-affirming break from a destructive marriage as well as betrayal.

Motif: a recurring word, phrase, image, figure of speech, or symbol that has particular significance.

Meter: a basic, fixed rhythm of accented and unaccented syllables that the lines of a particular poem follow.

Rhyme: a match between two or more words' final sounds (*Cupid, stupid; mark, park*).

Stanza: two or more lines of a poem that are grouped together. A stanza is preceded and followed by some blank space.

Alliteration: repetition of initial consonant sounds (such as the "b" sounds in "A *b*utterfly *b*looms on a *b*uttercup").

Assonance: repetition of vowel sounds (like the "a" sounds in "m*a*d *a*s *a* h*a*tter").

Sonnet: a fourteen-line, single-stanza poem following a strict pattern of meter and rhyme. The Italian, or *Petrarchan,* sonnet consists of two main parts: eight lines in the rhyme pattern *a b b a, a b b a,* followed by six lines in the pattern *c d c, c d c* or *c d e, c d e.* The English, or *Shakespearean,* sonnet consists of twelve lines in the rhyme scheme *a b a b, c d c d, e f e f,* followed by two rhymed lines *g g* (called a *couplet*). Traditionally, sonnets are love poems that involve some change in tone or outlook near the end.

HOW TO READ A LITERARY WORK

Read to Form a General Impression

The first step in analyzing a literary work is to read it through for an overall impression. Do you like the work? What does the writer seem to be saying? Do you have a strong reaction to the work? Why or why not?

Ask Questions About the Work

One way to focus your initial impressions is to ask yourself questions about the literary work. You could, for example, select from the following checklist those items that interest you the most or those that seem most relevant to the work you're analyzing.

☑ ANALYZING A LITERARY WORK: A CHECKLIST

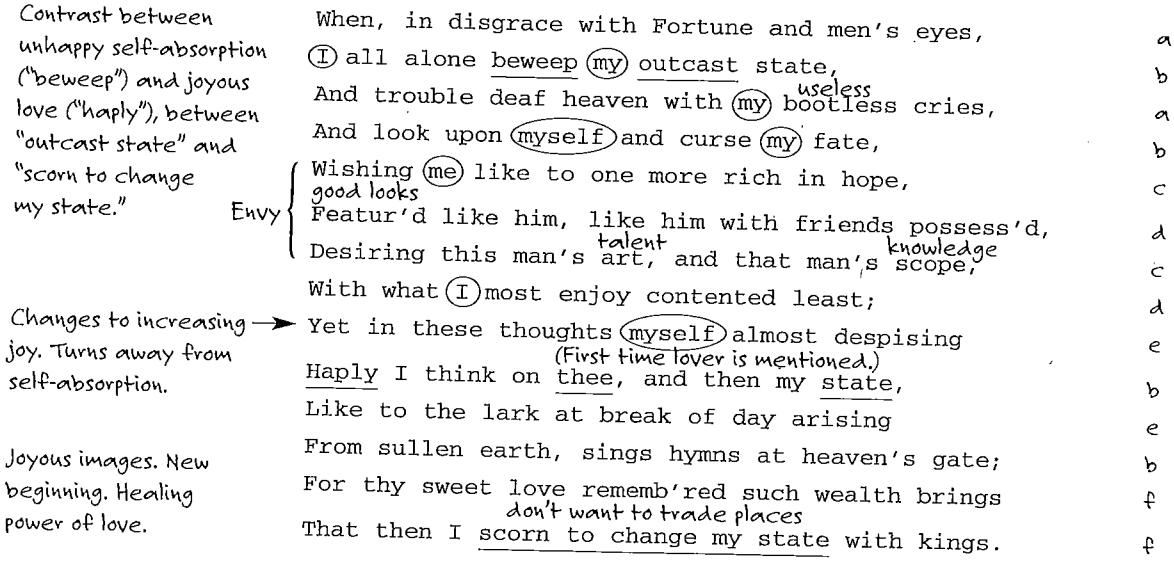
- ☐ What *themes* appear in the work? How do *structure, plot, characterization, imagery,* and other literary strategies reinforce theme?
- ☐ What gives the work its *structure* or shape? Why might the author have chosen this form? If the work is a poem, how do *meter, rhyme, alliteration, assonance,* and *line breaks* emphasize key ideas? Where does the work divide into parts? What words and images are repeated? What patterns do they form?
- ☐ How is the *plot* developed? Where is there any *foreshadowing?* What are the points of greatest suspense? Which *conflicts* add tension? How are they resolved? Where does the *climax* occur? What does the *resolution* accomplish?
- ☐ What do the various *characters* represent? What motivates them? How is character revealed through dialog, action, commentary, and physical description? In what ways do major characters change? What events and interactions bring about the changes?
- ☐ What is the relationship between *setting* and *action?* To what extent does setting mirror the characters' psychological states?

- ☐ Who is the *narrator?* Is the story told in the *first* or the *third person?* Is the narrator omniscient or limited in his or her knowledge of characters and events? Is the narrator recalling the past or reporting events as they happen?
- ☐ What is the author's own *point of view?* What are the author's implied *values* and *attitudes?* Does the author show any religious, racial, sexual, or other biases? Is there any discrepancy between the author's values and attitudes and those of the narrator? To whom in the work does the author grant the most status and consideration? Who is presented as less worthy of consideration?
- ☐ What about the work is *ironic* or surprising? Where is there a discrepancy between what is said and what is meant?
- ☐ What role do *figures of speech* play? What *metaphors,* if any, are sustained and developed? Why might the author have used these metaphors?
- ☐ What functions as a *symbol?* How can you tell?
- ☐ What *flaws* do you find in the work? Which elements fail to contribute to thematic development? Where does the work lose impact because ideas are stated directly rather than implied? Do any of the characters seem lifeless or inconsistent? Are any of them unnecessary to the work's key events and themes?

Reread and Annotate

Focusing on what you consider the most critical questions from the preceding checklist, begin a second, closer reading of the literary work. With pen or pencil in hand, look for answers to your questions, being sure to note telling details and patterns. Underline striking words, images, and ideas. Draw connecting lines between related items. Jot down questions, answers, and comments in the margins. Of course, if you don't own the work, then you can't write in it. In this case, make notes on a sheet of paper or on index cards.

We've marked the accompanying poem to give you an idea of just what annotation involves. The poem is Shakespeare's Sonnet 29, first published in 1609. Notice that the annotations reveal patterns crucial to an interpretation. For example, jotting down the *rhyme scheme* (*a b a b, c d c d,* and so on) leads to the discovery that one change in rhyme corresponds to a turning point in the narrator's thoughts (see line 9). Similarly, the circling or underlining of repeated or contrasting words highlights ideas developed throughout the poem. The words, *I, my,* and *state,* for instance, are emphasized by repetition. The marginal comments also capture possible *themes,* such as love's healing, redemptive power and the futility of self-absorption and envy.



Modify Your Annotations

Your annotations will help you begin to clarify your thoughts about the work. With these ideas in mind, try to read the work again; make further annotations on anything that seems relevant and modify earlier annotations in light of your greater understanding of the work. At this point, you're ready to move on to the actual analysis.

WRITE THE LITERARY ANALYSIS

When you prepare a literary analysis, the steps you follow are the same as those for writing an essay. You start with prewriting; next, you identify your thesis, gather evidence, write the draft, and revise; finally, you edit and proofread your paper.

Prewrite

Early in the prewriting stage, you should take a moment to think about your purpose, audience, point of view, and tone. Your **purpose** in writing a literary analysis is to share your insights about the work. Even if your paper criticizes some aspect of the work (perhaps it finds fault with the author's insensitive depiction of the poor), your primary purpose is still to convey your interpretation of the work's meaning and methods. When writing literary analysis, you customarily assume that your **audience** is composed of readers already familiar with the work. This makes your task easier. In the case of a play or story, for example, there's no need to rehash the plot.

As you write, you should adopt an objective, **third-person point of view.** Even though you're expressing your own interpretation of the work, guard against veering off into first-person statements like "In my opinion" and "I feel that." The **tone** of a literary analysis is generally serious and straightforward. However, if

your aim is to point out that an author's perspective is narrow or biased or that a work is artistically unworthy of high regard, your tone may also have a critical edge. Be careful, though, to concentrate on the textual evidence in support of your view; don't simply state your objections.

Prewriting actually begins when you annotate the work in light of several key questions you pose about it (see pages 638–639). After refining your initial annotations (see page 640), try to impose a tentative order on your annotations. Ask yourself, "What points do my annotations suggest?" List the most promising of these points on a separate sheet; then link these points to your annotations. There are a number of ways to proceed. You could, for instance, simply list the annotations under the points they support. Or you can number each point and give relevant annotations the same number as that point. Another possibility is to color-code your annotations: Give each point a color; then underline or circle in the same color any annotation related to that point. Finally, prepare a scratch outline of the main points you plan to cover, inserting your annotations in the appropriate spots. (For more on scratch outlines, see pages 35–37 in Chapter 2.)

If you have trouble generating and focusing ideas in this way, experiment with other prewriting strategies. You might, for example, *freewrite* a page or two on what you have highlighted in the literary text, *brainstorm* a list of ideas, or *map out* the work's overall structure (see pages 29–30 in Chapter 2). Mapping is especially helpful when analyzing a poem.

If the work still puzzles you, it may be helpful to consult outside sources. Encyclopedias, biographies of the author, and history books can clarify the context in which the work was written. Such reference books as *The Oxford Companion to American Literature* and *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* offer brief biographies of authors and summaries of their major works. In addition, *Twentieth-Century Short Story Explication: Interpretations, 1900–1975, of Short Fiction* lists books and articles on particular stories; and *Poetry Explication: A Checklist of Interpretation Since 1925 of British and American Poems Past and Present* does the same for individual poems.

Identify Your Thesis

Looking over your scratch list and any supplementary prewriting material or research notes you've collected, try to formulate a **working thesis.** As in other kinds of writing, your thesis statement for a literary analysis should include both your *limited subject* (the literary work you'll analyze and what aspect of the work you'll focus on), as well as your *attitude* toward that subject (the claim you'll make about the work's themes, the author's methods, the author's attitudes, and so on).

Here are some effective thesis statements for literary analysis:

In the poem "The Garden of Love," William Blake uses sound and imagery to depict what he considers the deadening effect of organized religion.

The characters in the novel Judgment Day illustrate James Farrell's belief that psychology, not sociology, determines fate.

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The figurative language in Marge Piercy's poem "The Longings of
Women" reveals much about women's feelings and their struggle for
power.
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If your instructor asks you to include commentary from professional critics, or if you explore such sources at your own initiative, proceed with caution. To avoid merely adopting others' ideas, try to formulate your thesis about the work *before* you read anyone else's interpretation. Then use others' opinions as added evidence in support of your thesis or as opposing viewpoints that you can counter. (For more on thesis statements, see pages 40–44 in Chapter 3.)

Thesis Statements to Avoid

Guard against a *simplistic* thesis. A statement like "The author shows that people are often hypocritical" doesn't say anything surprising and fails to get at a work's complexity. More likely, the author shares insights about the *nature* of hypocrisy, the *reasons* underlying it, the *forms* it can take, or its immediate and long-term *effects*.

An *overly narrow* thesis is equally misguided. Don't limit your thesis to the time and place in which the work is set. You shouldn't, for example, sum up the theme of Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* with the thesis "Hawthorne examines the intolerance of seventeenth-century Puritan New England." Hawthorne's novel probes the general, or universal, nature of communal intolerance. Puritan New England is simply the setting in which the work's themes are dramatized.

Also, make sure your thesis is *about the work.* Discussion of a particular *social* or *political issue* is relevant only if it sheds light on the work. If you feel a work has a strong feminist theme, it's fine to say so. It's a mistake, however, to stray to a nonliterary thesis such as "Feminism liberates both men and women."

A *biographical thesis* is just as inappropriate as a sociopolitical one. By all means, point out the way a particular work embodies an author's prejudices or beliefs ("Through a series of striking symbols, Yeats pays tribute in 'Easter, 1916' to the valiant struggle for Irish independence"). Don't, however, devise a thesis that passes judgment on the author's personal or psychological shortcomings ("Poe's neurotic attraction to inappropriate women is reflected in the poem 'To Helen'"). It's usually impossible to infer such personal flaws from the text alone. Perhaps the author had a mother fixation, but that determination belongs in the domain of psychoanalysis, not literary analysis.

Support the Thesis with Evidence

Once you've identified a working thesis, return to the text to make sure that nothing in the text contradicts your theory. Also, keeping your thesis in mind, search for previously overlooked **evidence** (*quotations* and *examples*) that develops your thesis. Consider, too, how *summaries* of portions of the work might support your interpretation.

If you don't find solid textual evidence for your thesis, either drop or modify it. Don't—in an effort to support your thesis—cook up possible relationships among

characters, twist metaphors out of shape, or concoct elaborate patterns of symbolism. As Sigmund Freud once remarked, "Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar." Be sure there's plentiful evidence in the work to support your interpretation. The text of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, for instance, doesn't support the view that the feud between the lovers' two families represents a power struggle between right-wing and left-wing politics.

Organize the Evidence

When it comes time to **organize your evidence,** look over your scratch list and evaluate the main points, textual evidence, and outside research it contains. Focusing on your thesis, decide which points should be deleted and which new ones should be added. Then identify an effective sequence for your points. That done, check to see if you've placed textual evidence and outside research under the appropriate points. If you plan to refute what others have said about the work, the discussion on pages 473–474 will help you block out the outline's refutation section. What you're aiming for is a solid, well-developed outline that will guide your writing of the first draft. (For more on outlining, see pages 60–61 in Chapter 5.)

When preparing your outline, remember that the patterns of development can help you sequence material. If you're writing in response to an assignment, the assignment itself may suggest certain patterns. Consider these examples:

Comparison-Contrast

In Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn,* what traits do the Duke and the Dauphin have in common? In what ways do the two characters differ?

Definition

How does Ralph Waldo Emerson define "forbearance" in his poem of that name?

Process Analysis

Discuss the stages by which Morgan Evans is transformed into a scholar in Emlyn Williams's play *The Corn Is Green.*

Notice that, in these assignments, certain words and phrases (*have in common; in what ways . . . differ; define;* and *discuss the stages*) signal which pattern would be particularly appropriate. Often, though, you'll write on a topic of your own choice. For help in deciding which pattern(s) of development you might use in such circumstances, turn to pages 69–70 in Chapter 6.

Write the First Draft

At this point, you're all set to write. As you rough out your first draft, try to include textual evidence (quotations, examples, summaries), as well as any outside commentary you may have gathered. However, if you get bogged down either incorporating all the evidence or making it blend smoothly with your own

points, move on. You can go back and smooth out any rough spots later. In general, proceed as you would in a research paper when blending quotations and summaries with your own words (see pages 590–591 in Chapter 21).

When preparing the draft, you should also take into account the following four conventions of literary analysis.

Use the Present Tense

Literary analysis is written in the **present,** not the past, tense:

In "Arrangement in Black and White," Dorothy Parker depicts the self-deception of a racist who is not conscious of her own racism.

The present tense is used because the literary work continues to exist after its completion. Use of the past tense is appropriate only when you refer to a time earlier than that in which the narrator speaks.

Identify Your Text

Even if your only source is the literary work itself, some instructors may want you to identify it by author, title, and publication data in a formal bibliographic note. In such a case, the first time you refer to the work in the paper, place a superscripted number after its title. Then, at the bottom of the page, type the same superscripted number, and, after it, provide full bibliographic information. Here's an example of such a bibliographic footnote:

[1]Marianne Moore, "To a Steam Roller," The Voice That Is Great Within Us: American Poetry of the Twentieth Century, ed. Hayden Carruth (New York: Bantam, 1985) 126.

(For more about bibliographic footnotes, consult the most recent edition of the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers.*)

Use Parenthetic References

If you're writing about a very short literary work, your instructor may not require documentation. Usually, however, documentation is expected.

Fiction quotations are followed by the page number(s) in parentheses (89); poetry quotations, by the line number(s) (12–14); and drama quotations, by act, scene, and line numbers (2.1.34–37). The parenthetic reference goes right after the quotation, even if your own sentence continues. When your sentence concludes with the quotation, the final period belongs *after* the parenthetic reference. If you use sources other than the literary text itself, document these as you would quotations or borrowed ideas in a research paper, and provide a Works Cited page. In this case, the literary work you're writing about should also be listed on the Works Cited page, rather than in a bibliographic footnote. (For more on parenthetic documentation and Works Cited listings, see Chapter 21.)

Quote Poetry Appropriately

If you're writing about a short poem, it's a good idea to include the poem's entire text in your paper. When you need to quote fewer than four lines from a poem, you can enclose them in quotation marks and indicate each line break with a slash (/): "But at my back I always hear / Time's winged chariot hurrying near." (Notice that space appears before and after the slash.) Verse quotations of four or more lines should be indented ten spaces from the left margin of your paper and should appear line for line, as in the original source—without slashes to indicate line breaks.

Revise Overall Meaning, Structure, and Paragraph Development

After completing your first draft, you'll gain helpful advice by showing it to others. The checklist that follows will help you and your readers apply to literary analysis some of the revision techniques discussed in Chapters 7 and 8.

☑ REVISING A LITERARY ANALYSIS: A CHECKLIST

Revise Overall Meaning and Structure

- ☐ What is the thesis of the analysis? According to the thesis, which elements of the work (such as theme and structure) will be discussed? In what ways, if any, is the thesis simplistic or too narrow? In what ways, if any, does it introduce extraneous social, political, or biographical issues?
- ☐ What main points support the thesis? If any points stray from or contradict the thesis, what changes should be made?
- ☐ How well supported by textual evidence is the essay's thesis? What evidence, crucial to the thesis, needs more attention? What other interpretation, if any, seems better supported by the evidence?
- ☐ Which patterns of development (comparison-contrast, process analysis, and so on) help shape the analysis? How do these patterns support the thesis?
- ☐ What purpose does the analysis fulfill? Does it simply present a straightforward interpretation of some aspect of the work? Does it point out some flaw in the work? Does it try to convince readers to accept an unconventional interpretation?
- ☐ How well does the analysis suit an audience already familiar with the work? How well does it suit an audience that may or may not share the interpretation expressed?

- ☐ What tone does the analysis project? Is it too critical or too admiring? Where does the tone come across as insufficiently serious?

Revise Paragraph Development

- ☐ What method of organization underlies the sequence of paragraphs? How effective is the sequence?
- ☐ Which paragraphs lack sufficient or sufficiently developed textual evidence? Where does textual evidence fail to develop a paragraph's central point? What important evidence, if any, has been overlooked?
- ☐ Which paragraphs contain too much textual evidence? Which quotations are longer than necessary?
- ☐ Where could textual evidence in a paragraph be more smoothly incorporated into the analysis?
- ☐ If any of the paragraphs include outside research (expert commentary, biographical data, historical information), how does this material strengthen the analysis? If any of the paragraphs consider alternative interpretations, are these opposing views refuted? Should they be?

Revise Sentences and Words

- ☐ Which words and phrases wrongly suggest that there is only one correct interpretation of the work ("Everyone must agree . . ." "Obviously . . . ")?
- ☐ What words give the false impression that it is possible to read an author's mind ("Clearly, Dickinson intends us to see the flowers as . . . " "With Willy Loman's suicide, Miller wants to show that . . . ")
- ☐ Where does the analysis fail to maintain the present tense? Which uses of past tense aren't justified—that is, which don't refer to something that occurred earlier than the narrator's present?
- ☐ Where is there inadequate or incorrect documentation?
- ☐ Where does language lapse into needless literary jargon?
- ☐ If poetry is quoted, where should slash marks indicate line breaks? Where should lines be indented?

Edit and Proofread

When editing and proofreading your literary analysis, you should proceed as you would with any other type of essay (see pages 139–141 in Chapter 9). Be sure, though, to check textual quotations with special care. Make sure you quote correctly, use ellipses appropriately, and follow punctuation and capitalization conventions.

PULLING IT ALL TOGETHER

Read to Form a General Impression

By this time, you're familiar with the steps involved in writing a literary analysis, so you're probably ready to apply what you've learned. The following short story was written by Langston Hughes (1902–1967), a poet and fiction writer who emerged as a major literary figure during the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s. Published in 1963, the story first appeared in *Something in Common,* a collection of Hughes's work. Read the story and gather your first impressions. Then follow the suggestions after the story.

LANGSTON HUGHES

EARLY AUTUMN

When Bill was very young, they had been in love. Many nights they had spent walking, talking together. Then something not very important had come between them, and they didn't speak. Impulsively, she had married a man she thought she loved. Bill went away, bitter about women.

Yesterday, walking across Washington Square, she saw him for the first time in years.

"Bill Walker," she said.

He stopped. At first he did not recognize her, to him she looked so old.

"Mary! Where did you come from?"

Unconsciously, she lifted her face as though wanting a kiss, but he held out his hand. She took it.

"I live in New York now," she said.

"Oh"—smiling politely. Then a little frown came quickly between his eyes.

"Always wondered what happened to you, Bill."

"I'm a lawyer. Nice firm, way downtown."

"Married yet?"

"Sure. Two kids."

"Oh," she said.

A great many people went past them through the park. People they didn't know. It was late afternoon. Nearly sunset. Cold.

"And your husband?" he asked her.

"We have three children. I work in the bursar's office at Columbia."

"You're looking very . . ." (he wanted to say *old*) ". . . well," he said.

She understood. Under the trees in Washington Square, she found herself desperately reaching back into the past. She had been older than he then in Ohio. Now she was not young at all. Bill was still young.

"We live on Central Park West," she said. "Come and see us sometime."

"Sure," he replied. "You and your husband must have dinner with my family some night. Any night. Lucille and I'd love to have you."

The leaves fell slowly from the trees in the Square. Fell without wind. Autumn dusk. She felt a little sick.

"We'd love it," she answered.

"You ought to see my kids." He grinned.

Suddenly the lights came on up the whole length of Fifth Avenue, chains of misty brilliance in the blue air.

"There's my bus," she said.

He held out his hand, "Good-by." 25

"When . . ." she wanted to say, but the bus was ready to pull off. The lights on the avenue blurred, twinkled, blurred. And she was afraid to open her mouth as she entered the bus. Afraid it would be impossible to utter a word.

Suddenly she shrieked very loudly, "Good-by!" But the bus door had closed.

The bus started. People came between them outside, people crossing the street, people they didn't know. Space and people. She lost sight of Bill. Then she remembered she had forgotten to give him her address—or to ask him for his—or tell him that her youngest boy was named Bill, too.

Ask Questions About the Work

Now that you've read Hughes's story, consult the questions on pages 638–639 so you can devise your own set of questions to solidify your first impressions. Here are some questions you might consider:

1. How does *setting* help bring out the theme?

   Answer: Both the time of year, "early autumn," and the time of day, "nearly sunset" suggest that time is running out. The place, a crowded walkway in a big city, highlights the idea of all the people with whom we never make contact—that is, of life's missed connections.

2. From what *point of view* is the story told? How does this relate to the story's meaning?

   Answer: The point of view is the third-person omniscient. This enables the author to show the discrepancy between what characters are thinking and what they are willing or able to communicate.

3. What *words* and *images* are repeated in the course of the story? How do these *motifs* reflect the story's theme?

   Answer: The words *young* and *old* appear a number of times. This repetition helps bring out the theme of aging, of time running out. *Walking* is another repeated word that gives the reader the sense of people's uninterrupted movement through life. The repeated phrase *people they don't know* emphasizes how hard it is for people to genuinely communicate and connect with one another. *Love,* another repeated word, underscores the tragedy of love lost or unfulfilled.

Reread and Annotate

In light of the questions you develop, reread and annotate Hughes's story. Then consider the writing assignments that follow.

1. Analyze how Hughes develops the theme that it is urgently important for people to "take time out" to communicate with one another.
2. Discuss some strategies that Hughes uses to achieve universality. You might, for example, call attention to the story's impersonal point of view, the lack of descriptive detail about the characters' appearances, and the generality of the information about the characters' lives.
3. Explain how Hughes uses setting to reveal the characters' psychological states and to convey their sense of loss.

STUDENT ESSAY

Which of the preceding assignments appeals to you most? Student Karen Vais decided to write in response to the first assignment. After using questions to focus her initial impressions and guide her annotations, Karen organized her prewriting and began to draft her literary analysis. The final version of her analysis follows. As you read the essay, consider how well Karen addresses both *what* Hughes expresses and *how* he expresses it. What literary devices does Karen discuss? How are these related to the story's theme? Also note that Karen doesn't identify "Early Autumn" with a bibliographic footnote. Because the story was assigned in class and everyone used the same text, she didn't need to provide such a footnote. Similarly, her instructor didn't require parenthetic documentation of quoted material because the story is so brief.

Stopping to Talk
by Karen Vais

1 In his short story "Early Autumn," Langston Hughes dramatizes the idea that hurried movement through life prevents people from forming or maintaining meaningful relationships. Hughes develops his theme of "walking" versus "talking" through such devices as setting, plot construction, and dialog.

Introduction

Thesis with plan of development

2 The story's setting continually reminds the reader that time is running out; it is urgent for people to stop and communicate before it is too late. The meeting between the two characters takes place on a busy walkway, where strangers hurry past one another. The season is autumn, the time is "late afternoon," the temperature is "cold." The end of the renewed connection between Mary and Bill coincides with the blurring of the streetlights. The chilly, dark setting suggests the coming of winter, of night, even of death.

First supporting paragraph: focus on setting

Second supporting paragraph: focus on plot

In keeping with the setting, the plot is a series of lost chances for intimacy. When they were young and in love, Bill and Mary used to "walk . . . [and] talk . . . together," but that was years ago. Then "something not very important . . . [came] between them, and they didn't speak." When she says Bill's name, Mary halts Bill's movement through the park, and, for a short time, Bill "Walker" stops walking. But when Mary hurries onto the bus, the renewed connection snaps. Moreover, even their brief meeting in the park is already a thing of the past, having taken place "yesterday." 3

Third supporting paragraph: focus on dialog

Like their actions, the characters' words illustrate a reluctance to communicate openly. The dialog consists of little more than platitudes: "I live in New York now. . . . We have three kids. . . . You and your husband must have dinner with my family some night." The narrator's telling comments about what remains unspoken ("he wanted to say . . . ," "she wanted to say . . .") underscore Bill and Mary's separateness. Indeed, Mary fails to share the one piece of information that would have revealed her feelings for Bill Walker--that her youngest son is also named Bill. 4

Conclusion

The theme of walking vs. talking runs throughout "Early Autumn." "Space and people," Hughes writes, once again come between Bill and Mary, and, as in the past, they go their separate ways. Through the two characters, Hughes seems to be urging each of us to speak--to slow our steps long enough to make emotional contact. 5

Commentary

Note that Karen states her *thesis* in the opening paragraph; this first sentence addresses the *what* of the story: "the idea that hurried movement through life prevents . . . meaningful relationships." The next sentence addresses the *how:* "Hughes develops his theme . . . through such devices as setting, plot construction, and dialog." This second sentence also announces the essay's *plan of development.* Karen will discuss setting, then plot, then dialog, with one paragraph devoted to each of these literary elements. In the body of the analysis, Karen backs up her thesis with *textual evidence* in the form of summaries and quotations. The quotations are no longer than is necessary to support her points. In the

concluding paragraph, Karen repeats her thesis, reinforcing it with Hughes's own words. She ends by pointing out the relevance of the story's theme to the reader's own life.

Writing Assignment on "Early Autumn"

Having seen what one student did with "Early Autumn," look back at the second and third writing assignments on page 649 and select one for your own analysis of Hughes's story. Then, in light of the assignment you select, read the story again, making any adjustments in your annotations. Next, organize your prewriting annotations into a scratch list, identify a working thesis, and organize your ideas into an outline. That done, write your first draft. Before submitting your analysis, take time to revise, edit, and proofread it carefully.

ADDITIONAL SELECTIONS AND WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

The two selections that follow—a poem by Robert Frost and a short story by Kate Chopin—will give you further practice in analyzing literary texts. No matter which selection you decide to write on, the following guidelines should help you approach the literary analysis with confidence.

Start by reading the text once to gain an overall impression. Then, draw on any of the questions on pages 638–639 to help you focus your first impressions and guide your annotations. When deciding what to write about, you may select a topic of your own, a subject proposed by your instructor, or one of the assignments suggested after the readings. With your topic in mind, reread the selection and evaluate the appropriateness of your earlier annotations. Make whatever changes are needed before moving your annotations into an informal scratch list. Next, review the scratch list so you can formulate a working thesis and prepare an outline of your ideas. Then go ahead and write your first draft, making sure you revise, edit, and proofread thoroughly before handing in your analysis.

ROBERT FROST

Best known for his poetry about New England life, Robert Frost (1874–1963) was born in San Francisco and moved to Massachusetts in 1885. After briefly attending