

Short Story Analysis

It is easy to understand the objective of an analysis essay once *analysis* is defined and understood as “the separation of a whole into its component parts” (“Analysis”). By analyzing a story or other text, a reader should gain a deeper understanding of the relationships between the parts, or elements, of the story and how these parts shape the story itself. Think of it as though you were taking apart a watch. You look at the pieces and form an idea of how the parts affect the whole. In this way, reading critically means to evaluate the ideas and meanings in the text and make connections between them based on evidence from the story. Thus, when writing an analytical paper, a student should allow enough time to complete the following, minimal steps:

- Preview, actively read, and review the text. Active reading means underlining and noting connections, patterns, or questions raised in the story while you read. Look for information that catches your attention or seems significant to the story.
- Use these notes and thought-provoking questions—including arguments and connections made—to formulate a thesis that you will prove to the reader (see the Writing Center handouts “How to Write a Thesis Statement” and “Thesis Statement Types & Models”). It may help to ask a major question about the story and then answer it using your thesis statement.
- Reexamine the thesis for logical reasoning, complexity, and originality.
- Create an outline by organizing examples that support the thesis arguments (along with analysis and interpretation of these) into paragraphs.
- Compose a rough draft following MLA guidelines—including a Works Cited page.
- Revise, revise, and revise.
- Edit and proofread.

Terms and story elements to know

Exposition: Setting and characters introduced?	Characterization: Who are the characters? Describe them, their relationships, connections, worldviews, ideas about themselves, others.
Protagonist: Main character? Character’s function and significance?	Antagonist: Character or force working against protagonist?
Flat/Static Character(s): Which characters stay the same throughout the story?	Round/Dynamic Character(s): Which characters learn, grow, and change?
Plot (Sequence of Events): What happens first? Next? After that? Finally?	Setting: Where and when does the story occur?
Conflict (Problem): What is the driving force (cause) behind the plot?	Foreshadowing/Suspense/Rising Action: What will happen? How do you know? Effects?
Climax (Crisis): What is the most exciting part of the story? When do the protagonist and antagonist converge?	Resolution (Denouement): How are the “loose ends” of the story finally tied up? How is the conflict finally resolved?
Theme (Claim, Message, and Moral): What is the author’s message to the audience? What should readers learn from the story?	Point of View (Narrator): Who is telling the story? Is the narrator: reliable, unreliable, omniscient, objective, neutral?
Language (Figurative Devices, Style, Tone, Mood): How is the author’s language or word choice unique? Describe the author’s feelings regarding characters, setting, plot.	Irony (Verbal, Situational, and Dramatic): What discrepancies or contradictions are present in the story and its characters?
Symbolism/Allusion: S: What objects or actions contain hidden or implied meanings? A: Does the author refer to historical events? Other texts?	Imagery: What words, phrases, patterns describe the characters’ experiences as observed through their senses?

Content: what to say (or not)

Adapted from the Roane State Community College (RSCC) Online Writing Lab:

- Never avoid saying the obvious; it is usually true. But do not spend a lot of time on it—acknowledge its obviousness, perhaps by a word like "clearly," then move on to an idea less obvious.
- An ideal paper is one in which the writer discovers something and shares his or her pleasure in the discovery with a reader. The discovery may be an interpretation of a challenging story or poem (or portion thereof), or it may just be the discovery of what you really think about an idea. ("How do I know what I think until I see what I have said," Churchill is supposed to have said.) For the writer to discover his or her own considered opinion or valuation of the work he or she is writing about is a satisfying outcome to a paper.
- The writer should avoid apologizing for what he or she is saying. The views and interpretations offered are one's own, so the writer should not include such boring and weak phrases as "It seems to me" or "In my opinion."
- The only kind of **originality** that matters to the writer is finding the source of ideas and feelings within himself or herself, being true to that origin. In a class paper, it does not matter if the writer says what has been said before. In any case, it has not been said in the same way, and the study of literature reveals that the *way* of saying something is part of its meaning.
- The writer should use literary concepts and **terms** (characterization, plot, climax, symbolism, theme, etc.), but use them only when they pay off, not automatically. Paraphrasing (using the writer's own words to explain an idea from a source), for example, should be used selectively, when a line or sentence has a tricky or uncertain meaning but the writer wants to spell it out the best way possible.
- In writing about fiction, the writer will find more interesting things to say if he or she focuses on **characterization rather than characters**. Writing about characters too often means writing as though they were real people, speculating about what happened before or after the action of the book or story, and other uncertainties like that. Characters in a work of fiction are **not** real people but rather careful constructs that resemble real people. Focusing on *characterization* means studying how the author presents the character—what selection of detail is used, what mixture of direct "showing" to indirect "telling" is present, what implied valuations are being made, and the like.
- Rule of thumb: When the writer quotes supporting passages from the text being discussed, he or she should never let the quotation just lie there on the page inertly. **Make use of it. Put it to work.** Point to specific features or details or words in it. The writer should say what he or she sees, what it is that makes him or her want to let the readers have it in front of them. It is no good (in a class paper) if the writer thinks that the readers can surely work out the point for themselves. In this context, it is up to the writer to do the work. After all, one of the writer's purposes is to persuade readers that they can understand the meaning.
- **Accuracy** in quoting is crucially important. The writer should change nothing from the source without showing that he or she is doing so—not spelling, not capitalization, not line breaks, not paragraphing. And quotations **must fit into the writer's sentence in a way that makes sense**. This point is important and often causes trouble.
- **Avoid plot summary for its own sake.** The reader should already be familiar with the plot.
- The writer should use past tense to talk about biographical facts or publication data but **present tense** to talk about what happens in a work of fiction or poetry. Example: "Plath's *Ariel* was published after her death, but the poems show many premonitions of disaster to come."

Questions to help understand the short story

1. What is the story's title? What is the date of its original publication?
2. What is the author's name? Is the author's nationality and date of birth and death significant for understanding the story?
3. What is the name (if any) of the main character, along with a description of that character's dominant traits or features?
4. How are any other characters described?
5. What is the setting (place and time) of the story?
6. What is the point of view from which the story is told?
7. What are the story's main events? Give a terse summary of what happens in chronological order.
8. What is the general tone, or, in other words, the author's feelings toward the central character or the main event?
9. In what style is the story written? Brief illustrative quotations are helpful if space allows.
10. Does the story contain any kind of irony, and what does the irony contribute to the story?
11. In a sentence, what is the story's main theme?
12. Are there any key symbols? Give an educated guess at what each symbol suggests.
13. Finally, how should the writer evaluate the story as a whole? The writer should concisely set forth his opinion of it. (Some instructors consider this the most important part of an analysis, and most students find that by the time they have so painstakingly separated the ingredients of the story, they have arrived at a definite opinion of its merits.)

Sources

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See also: *The Norton Introduction to Literature*, Shorter 12th edition, pp. 1885-1933.