

# What is Literary Analysis?

Literary analysis examines or evaluates a work of literature or a specific aspect of that work. Analysis is all about breaking a subject down into its parts to understand the whole.

**Literary analysis:** a process of examining the parts of a literary work to better appreciate and understand the work of literature as a whole.

For example, to analyze a poem, you might examine the different types of images in the poem or the relationship between the form and content of the work. For a short story, you might identify a particular theme (like the difficulty of transitioning from adolescence to adulthood) and show how the writer suggests that theme through the story's point of view.

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# Writing Literary Analysis

Writing boils down to developing an idea. Your goal in an analysis essay is to convince the reader that you've developed and supported your central idea. This means your writing must closely stick to that idea.

To do this, follow the...

## **3 Principles of a Literary Analysis Essay**

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**1.** Contains a central idea or thesis that states the essay's overall point and guides its development.

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**2.** Has several paragraphs with topic sentences that grow logically from the thesis statement.

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**3.** Is organized so that every part of the essay contributes something to the reader's understanding of the thesis.

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# The Thesis Statement

A literary analysis essay requires a thesis that states and guides your ideas.

**Thesis:** a restricted, carefully worded statement of the point your essay is making. It tells readers what to expect and is essential to a successful essay.

Because it appears at the start of an essay, students often think they need to perfectly know their thesis before they begin writing. However, even though the thesis is presented up front in a paper, it is best to revise for a reader at the end of the writing process. Like scientists, writers begin more with a hypothesis than a thesis. After writing and developing your ideas, it's wise to reword your thesis statement to better fit the overall point of your essay.

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# Thesis Examples

Here are some examples of a thesis which would work for a 500-750 word literary analysis essay:

The fate of the main characters in *Antigone* illustrates the danger of excessive pride.

The imagery in Dylan Thomas's poem "Fern Hill" reveals the ambiguity of humans' relationship with nature.

Gwendolyn Brooks's 1960 poem "The Ballad of Rudolph Reed" demonstrates how the poet uses the conventional poetic form of the ballad to treat the unconventional poetic subject of racial intolerance.

Typically, the thesis appears at the end of your introduction paragraph.

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# The Introduction

An introduction should try to...

**1. Provide context for your topic.**

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**2. Grab your reader's interest.**

To grab attention and provide context, you may want to begin your introduction with:

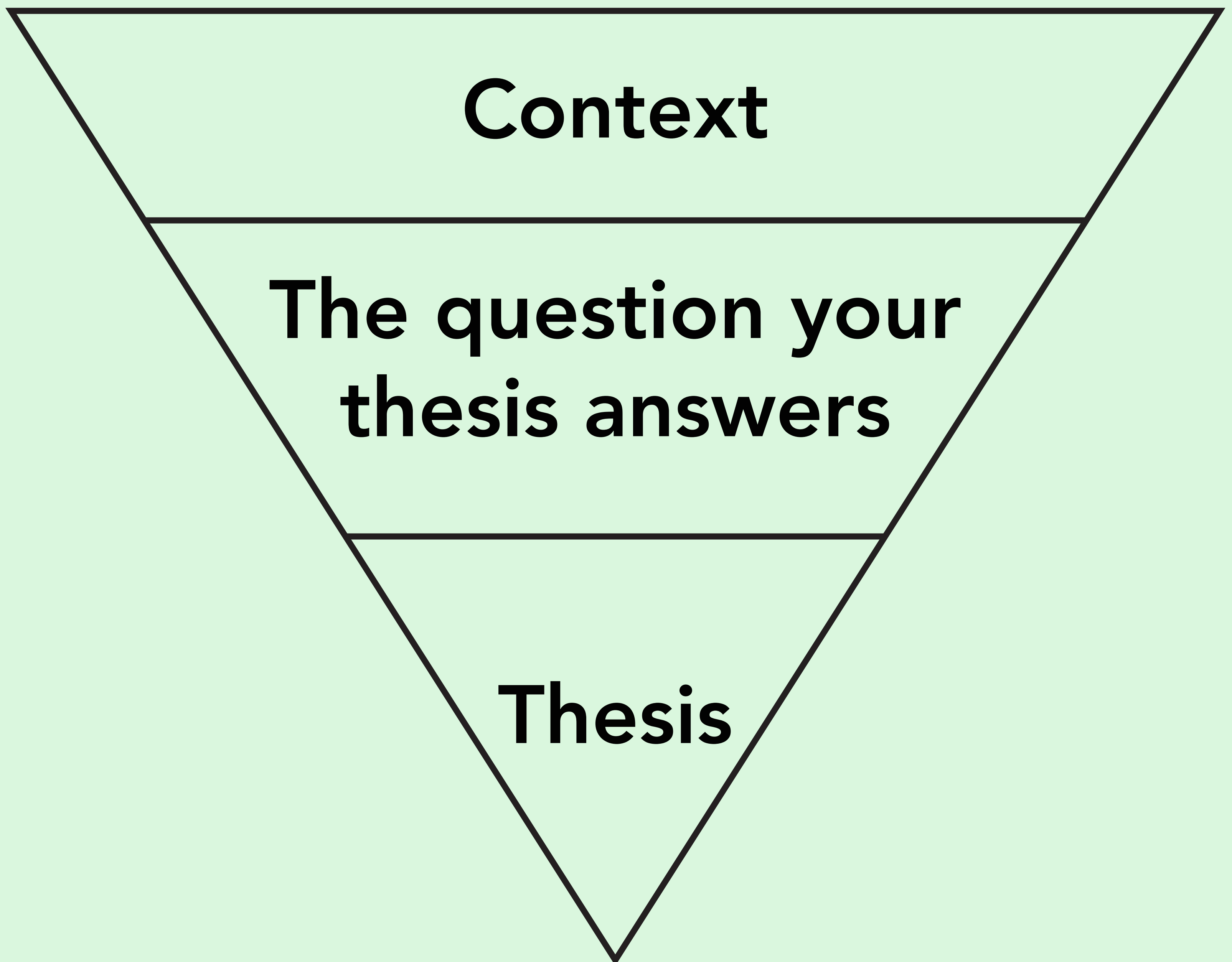
- a quotation,
- a provocative question,
- a brief anecdote,
- a startling statement,
- useful background information,
- or a combination of these.

**Make sure your introduction includes the title of the work you're analyzing and name of the author!**

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# Introduction Structure

Think of your introduction as an upside down triangle: it begins broad and becomes more focused--the "point" is your thesis.



Generally, introductions should be about one-tenth of the total paper length. In other words, if it's a five-page paper, then the introduction should be about half a page.

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# Introduction Example

The setting of John Updike's story "A&P" is crucial to the reader's understanding of Sammy's decision to quit his job. Even though Sammy knows that his quitting will make life more difficult for him, he instinctively rejects what the A&P store represents in the story. When he rings up a "No Sale" and "saunter[s]" out of the store, Sammy leaves behind not only a job but the rigid state of mind associated with the A&P. Although Sammy is the central character in the story, Updike seems to invest as much effort in describing the setting as he does Sammy. The title, after all, is not "Youthful Rebellion" or "Sammy Quits" but "A&P." The setting is the antagonist of the story and plays a role that is as important as Sammy's.

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# Writing Your Introduction

While it is tempting to you write your introduction right away, it can be easier, and more focused, if you wait until you have finished the body of your essay. On the other hand, some students prefer to write a place-holder introduction to get into the flow of writing and then revise that temporary introduction after finishing the essay.

In either case, it's best to concentrate on the introduction after you've written your body paragraphs. In the same way a thesis is developed and refined through the process of writing the essay, introductions are best composed when you already know what your essay wants to say.

**In short, concentrate on your introduction after finishing the body.**

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# Body Paragraphs

The body of your essay should...

1. Develop your central idea.

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2. Support your thesis through textual evidence and literary analysis.

**Textual evidence** consists of summary, paraphrase, specific details and direct quotations from the text that support your thesis statement.

Good literary analysis essays explain their central idea and thesis using both textual evidence and analysis in which you interpret the text to show how it supports your ideas.

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# Topic Sentences

Body paragraphs begin with a topic sentence that states one of the topics associated with your thesis, along with an assertion about how that topic supports the central idea.

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A topic sentence should...

**1.** Relate the details of the paragraph to your thesis statement.

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**2.** Tie the details of the paragraph together.

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Topic sentences are very important to structure and flow. The substance of each of your body paragraphs will be the textual evidence (explanations, summaries, paraphrases, specific details, and direct quotations) needed to develop the more general statement made in the topic sentence.

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# Body Paragraph Example

Sammy's descriptions of the A & P present a setting that is ugly, monotonous, and rigidly regulated. The chain store is a common fixture in modern society, so the reader can identify with the uniformity Sammy describes. The fluorescent light is as blandly cool as the "checkerboard green-and-cream rubber tile floor" (486). The "usual traffic in the store moves in one direction (except for the swim suited girls, who move against it), and everything is neatly organized and categorized in tidy aisles. The dehumanizing routine of this environment is suggested by Sammy's offhand references to the typical shoppers as "sheep," "house slaves," and "pigs" (486). These regular customers seem to walk through the store in a stupor; as Sammy indicates, not even dynamite could move them out of their routine (485).

This paragraph is strong because it is developed through textual evidence like quotes and summary.

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# The Conclusion

The conclusion should...

**1.** Give the essay a sense of completeness.

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**2.** Let your reader know that they have reached the end of your paper.

To do that, your concluding paragraph might:

- restate the thesis in different words,
- summarize the main points you have made in the essay,
- make a relevant comment about the text from a different perspective,
- or a combination of these.

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# The Title of Your Essay

The title of your essay should...

**1.** Describe the approach you are taking in the paper.

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**2.** Let your reader know that they have reached the end of your paper.

Here are some examples for titles:

Robert Browning's Duke: A Portrayal of a Sinister Man

The A & P as a State of Mind

Theme in "The Secret Lion:" The Struggle of Adolescence

Like the introduction, its best to concentrate on a title only after you know what your essay will say.

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# Your Audience

Consider the reader of your essay. Imagine you are writing for both your professor and the other students in your class. They have read the assigned work just as you have, but perhaps they have not thought about it in exactly the same way.

For that reason:

- 1.** Don't attempt to "retell" the text.

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- 2.** Rather, interpret the text—explain what certain elements of the work mean in relation to your thesis.

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- 3.** When you reference the text, do so to remind the audience of something they already know.

The main point of your essay is to draw conclusions and develop arguments. Be sure to avoid plot summary.

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