

Gathering Evidence and Discovering a Focus for a Paper of Literary Analysis

"Use your brains; be candid in stating your opinion; keep your eye on the text. "

Donald Hall

1. Before you even consider picking up a pencil, read the story or poem carefully. In the case of poetry, read the poem aloud to yourself or have someone read it to you. When you finish, immediately write down any feelings you have about the work. When we read a poem or story, we should read it in such a way that we become physically aware of it through our senses. Reading a story or poem should be a felt and intellectual response. Get your first impressions down on paper. Analysis and explanation come later. Trust your feelings at this point.
2. Now that you have noted your initial feelings and thoughts about the work, read it again. This time jot down ideas and details as you read. Remain especially alert to repeated words and images. Don't worry about their significance yet. The task now is to record those "facts" of the story or poem that contributed to your first impression of the work.
3. You are now well on the way to making some personal assessment of the work based on your feelings and observations. You will be surprised by how writing a paper based on your feelings and ideas deepens your understanding of the work and strengthens your confidence in your ability to interpret literature.
4. You are now at the stage where you must do some hard thinking. Look over the notes you have jotted down. In the context of the story or poem, what strikes you about the patterns, contrasts, images, or whatever else you have noted? As you go over your list of details develop three or four categories under which you might order the details. The next step—perhaps the most difficult—is to separate the details into those categories, discarding details that do not fit and going back to the story or poem to find those you might have overlooked. Remember that you do not have to cover everything in a literary analysis. The categories you develop will help you focus on those parts of the work you will be discussing in your paper.
5. Now that you have grouped the details, look for a unifying idea (which may or may not confirm your first impression) and try to state it clearly. This statement most likely will be your umbrella statement that will be the ruling idea of your paper and guide you in the selection and organization of details that you will be discussing. In other words, it will be your working thesis statement. Don't, however, be reluctant to modify this statement; it is something like the working hypothesis a scientist uses as he investigates a problem—subject to change if additional information appears.

A word of caution: Problems arise when we try to cover too much. When we try to write about an entire work, we often end up merely summarizing or paraphrasing it. **AVOID SUMMARY. NEVER MERELY RETELL WHAT HAPPENS IN THE STORY OR POEM. DON'T APOLOGIZE: HAVE CONFIDENCE IN YOUR INTERPRETATION.**

Another word of caution: Stay in touch with your feeling, but also use your intelligence. You are to write about (interpret) some part of the work, not merely talk about your personal reactions.

Writing about Poems

1. Read the poem aloud, paying attention to the role of punctuation, line and stanza breaks, and word choice.
2. From the sound of the poem, identify any rhyming pattern and/or noticeable repetitions of sounds--alliteration, assonance, consonance. Watch also for near rhymes and eye rhyme.
3. Listen for rhythmic patterns.
4. Consider the images suggested by the poem.
5. Look for figures of speech, i.e., metaphor, simile, metonymy, synecdoche, onomatopoeia, hyperbole, litotes, personification.
6. Look for manipulation of words, i.e., anaphora, multiple meanings, allusions, symbols.
7. Consider the speaker (the poet is often not the speaker) and his/her attitude or perspective on the topic.
8. Consider the setting of the poem (time and place) and the circumstances surrounding the moment.
9. State what you see as the central idea of the poem.
10. Consider how the idea is developed and presented.
11. Consider the appropriateness of the language to the topic and tone. (Tone is the author's, not necessarily the speaker's, attitude toward the subject of the poem, e.g., loving, ironic, sarcastic, angry, sad, playful, serious.)
12. If appropriate, consider the typography of the poem, i.e., how it looks on the page.