

UMD ARC/Writing & Reading Center

Analyzing Literature

Analyses are the most popular form of paper written about literature. Whether an analytic paper is just a few pages or many, it cannot attempt to discuss everything about the work. That is why it is important to narrow down a topic so that it is manageable. Below is a list of questions that may be helpful when trying to find a focus for your paper. Not all of these questions will apply to all works.

Formalist Questions

Formal elements of a work concentrate on the form that the author chose to write the work in.

Use these questions to help focus your essay on the language, structure and tone.

1. How do various elements of the work - plot, character, point of view, setting, tone, diction, images, symbol, etc. - reinforce its meanings?
2. How are these elements related as a whole?
3. How is the work organized?
4. What issues does the work raise? How does the work's structure resolve those issues?

Biographical Questions

Biographical elements focus on the experiences in the author's life. Use these questions to help you understand the relationship between the author's life and his/her work.

1. Are there facts about the writer's life relevant to your understanding of the work?
2. Are the characters and incidents in the work versions of the writer's own experiences?
3. How do you think the writer's values are reflected in the work?

Psychological Questions

A psychological approach to literature draws upon characters' behaviors to better understand the text.

1. How do the characters' behaviors reflect the author's personal psychology?
2. What do the characters' emotions and behavior reveal about their psychological states? What types of personalities are they?
3. Are psychological matters such as repression, dreams, and desire presented through the characters consciously or unconsciously by the author?

Historical Questions

1. How does the work reflect the period in which it is/was written?
2. How does the work reflect the period it represents?
3. What literary or historical influences helped to shape the form and content of the work?
4. How important is the historical context (both the work's and your own) to interpreting the work?

*Compiled by:
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