Chapter 8: The Literary Analysis Essay

Now that we have discussed the basic conventions and terminology associated with poetry, fiction, drama, and creative nonfiction, let’s explore how one progresses from reading a piece of literature to producing a literary analysis paper on that work. It is important to note that the process of writing discussed in this chapter can be used in writing for any discipline. As stated in this book’s Introduction, literature provides a fruitful context for development of writing skills, but the skills themselves are transferable into a multitude of communication situations.

# Literary Analysis Arguments

**Analysis** means to break something down in order to better understand how it works. To analyze a literary work is to pull it apart and look at its discrete components to see how those components contribute to the meaning and/or effect of the whole. Thus, a literary analysis argument considers what has been learned in analyzing a work (What do the parts look like and how do they function?) and forwards a particular *perspective* on their contribution to the whole (In light of the author’s use of diction, for example, what meaning does the novel, as a whole, yield?).

Consider, once again, the literary analysis arguments presented in this book so far:

Marion Velis (Chapter 2): “At first glance, Theodore Roethke’s poem ‘My Papa’s Waltz’ may seem like a poem about a boy’s fear of his controlling, abusive, alcoholic father. But the poem goes much deeper than that. Roethke uses specific rhythm, word choice, and a controlling metaphor to give the poem a reminiscent tone that looks back on the father in love.”

Bill Day (Chapter 5): “Through the metaphors of Jake’s wound and the tainted Pamplona fiesta, the novel [*The Sun Also Rises*] conveys the possibility that we can dangerously disrupt the cycle of renewal.”

Katherine Jones (Chapter 5): “Brett, as she is developed in the novel [*The Sun Also Rises*], has been painted in different lights, depending on the interpreter, ranging from a sympathetic view to one of condemnation. The portrait of her that I will attempt to show is one of a human being, caught between the ideologies of two eras.”

Each of these essays engages in analysis of the text in question, pointing to and considering plot events, images, character traits, dialogue, and other *components* of the work to understand the meaning of the text as a *whole*. Although in her thesis, Katherine does not list the “parts” that her paper investigates, she goes on to focus on Brett’s specific *behaviors* and *expressions* that support the essay’s interpretation of *The Sun Also Rises*.

# Writing as a Process: Breaking It Down

For many students, approaching a writing assignment can be overwhelming. They know that there are many tasks that must be completed, such as gathering information about the topic, forming a perspective on it, brainstorming ideas to be included in the paper, organizing those ideas, integrating the evidence, and articulating the argument with clarity and eloquence, not to mention accommodating the assigned format guidelines. This job is not unlike building a house. You look at the empty lot and imagine the beautiful house you want to build, but you know that the tasks necessary to get from nothing to the final product are many and varied. The prospect can certainly be overwhelming. Yet, any builder understands that the best approach to a big job like this one is breaking it down into a methodical and carefully scheduled process. In response to a challenging writing assignment, you are encouraged to do the same.

Let’s consider the writing assignment Bill originally received from his English 1102 instructor:

For this essay, write a literary analysis of Ernest Hemingway’s The Sun Also Rises using a formalist approach. The essay should forward a specific perspective on the novel (articulated in your thesis), and the evidence for your argument should come from the novel itself. The essay should be three-four pages in length.

Due date: February 3.

Bill remembers that in his high school senior English class, he once procrastinated on a major paper assignment and ended up writing the whole essay in one night. The result was a “D” on the paper and a tendency to experience writer’s block, which still plagued him all during his first semester of college. But he has one tool this second semester that he has not had before: his instructor’s handout on “Writing as a Process.” The literary analysis essay for this class is not due for three weeks, but he decides to review the handout *now* as a first step to avoiding writer’s block and another low grade. Here is the advice recommended in his instructor’s handout:

1. Investigate the general topic; in this case, read the novel and make notes and annotations as you go.
2. Brainstorm points of interest regarding what you’ve learned so far. As you brainstorm, do not try to write in full sentences or to organize your thoughts. Instead, simply write down everything that comes to mind.
3. Read back over your notes and decide on a focus. Considering this focus, decide *what you think* about this topic, based on your observations so far. Form a *perspective* on the topic.
4. Again considering your brainstorming notes, determine a very general organization for the *major points* on this topic. Once you have completed this basic outline, categorize all the leftover *“smaller” items* under the most relevant *major points*. If some items on your brainstorming page don’t seem relevant, mark through them. Keep only the items that fit your paper’s focus.
5. With the paper topic and its major supporting points in mind, write a *working thesis*. This thesis is not set in stone yet, but it will help you stay on track as you move forward.
6. Go back to your materials on the general topic now—in this case, comb through your notes on the novel, annotations, and highlighted passages. Would any of these words, ideas, and/ or passages make effective *evidence* to develop one or more of your major points? As you find fruitful items, jot down a
7. quote, summary, or paraphrase of each item, along with the page number of the novel where you found it. Make a note to yourself indicating which *major point* each item supports.
8. Revise your paper outline now to include not only the working thesis and the major points, but also the pieces of evidence that will go under each major point.
9. Begin drafting the paper. If the introduction does not come quickly, skip it. Keep your working thesis in mind and write out the major sections of your paper which support that thesis.
10. Now go back to the introduction. Consider your audience. How are you trying to alter your audience’s perspective on the novel with this paper? How can you use the introduction to (a) draw your reader’s interest to your new way of looking at the novel and (b) lay the groundwork for your argument? The introduction should accomplish these goals. Write your conclusion with similar goals in mind. This is your last chance to persuade your reader that your perspective is convincing and important. How can you leave your reader with a strong and lasting impression?
11. Once you have drafted the entire essay, start at the beginning and revise. Pay particular attention to coherence during this phase. In a coherent paper, everything in the essay promotes its central purpose. During this phase, you may want to *clarify and strengthen the relationships among ideas* with transition words and explanations. A coherent paper exhibits a certain *tightness* that produces the desired impact on the reader. Imagine that you are reading the paper aloud to an actual audience of fellow students who have their own values and opinions. How can
12. you shape the prose to (1) keep their attention, (2) clearly and persuasively convey your case, and (3) convince these readers that your perspective is a valuable one?
13. Final revision phase: Read through the essay as many times as you need to, checking grammar and spelling and giving the language its final polish. Read it aloud again, this time slowly, to be sure that the essay sounds as eloquent as you intended for it to.
14. Be sure that the essay follows the format guidelines and is ready for submission.

In class, after handing out this sheet, Bill’s instructor told the students to take out their datebooks. She told the students to consult their schedules and assign “dummy” dates for each item on the task list. Here is how Bill divided up his time for addressing the tasks necessary for completing the paper:

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **January 12** | **13**  Attend math, English, and history class  **Read and annotate novel (2 hrs.)**  Math homework  Read chapter in history | **14**  Attend biology  **Read and annotate novel (2 hrs.)**  Read biology chapter  Fraternity meeting | **15**  Attend math, English, and history class  **Read and annotate novel (2 hrs.)**  Math homework | **16**  Attend biology and lab  **Read and annotate novel (2 hrs.)**  Review biology notes | **17**  Attend math, English, and history class  **Brainstorm for essay 1 (1 hr.); Decide on and write down paper’s focus (30 min.)** | **18**  Fraternity workday |
| **19** | **20** | **21** | **22** | **23** | **24** | **25** |
| **Make a tentative outline of major and supporting points for essay 1 (1 hr.)**  Review history notes | Attend math, English, and history class  Math homework  **Compose a working thesis for essay 1 (30 min.)** | Attend biology  **Review notes and novel itself for best evidence/ examples (2 hrs.)**  Read biology chapter | Attend math, English, and history class  **Continue finding evidence for essay 1 (2 hrs.)**  Math homework | Attend biology and lab  **Revise essay 1 outline to**  **include specific evidence items (1 hr.)**  Review biology notes | Attend math, English, and history class  Go home for Granny’s birthday | Granny’s birthday party |
|  |  | Fraternity meeting |  |  |  |  |

The Literary Analysis Essay

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **26** | **27** | **28** | **29** | **30** | **31** | **February 1** |
| **Draft essay 1 (3 hrs.)**  Review history notes  Study for math test | Attend math, English, and history class  Math homework  Community service | Attend biology  Study for history exam  Write biology lab report  Fraternity meeting | Attend math, English, and history class  History exam  **Write introduction and conclusion for essay 1 (1 hr.)** | Attend biology and lab  Submit lab report  Study for math test  Review biology notes | Attend math, English, and history class  Math exam  **Revise**  **essay 1 (2 hrs.)** | Work on math group project |
|  |  |  | Math homework | **Revise essay 1**  **(2 hrs.)** |  |  |
| **2** | **3** | **4** | **5** | **6** | **7** | **8** |
| **Format, proofread, and polish and**  **print essay 1 (2 hrs.)**  Review history notes | Attend math, English, and history class  **Submit essay 1**  Math homework | Attend biology  **Begin working on Essay 2**  Read biology chapter  Fraternity meeting | Attend math, English, and history class  Math homework | Attend biology and lab  Review biology notes | Attend math, English, and history class | Work on math group project |

To some students, the idea of working for an entire three weeks on a three to four page essay might seem extreme. Yet, anyone who writes for a living will attest that all of these tasks are necessary for a high quality product. Professional writers may allocate their time a bit differently, perhaps working for eight or nine hours in one day on a single project, and undoubtedly they gain speed over time at completing each stage of the process. Even so, they understand that for a product with the desired impact, one must spend time planning and crafting the piece. Since students are usually taking other classes in addition to English, and must often hold down jobs and fulfill personal obligations, Bill’s Essay 1 plan is much more likely to work out than a twenty-hour writing marathon beginning two days before the paper’s due-date. Notice that Bill did not schedule any Essay 1 tasks for January 18, 24-25, 27-28, and February 1. Looking ahead in his date book, he realized that he has fraternity events on January 18 and 27, and he wants to save time on the other dates to join his family for his grandmother’s birthday celebration, as well as to study intensively for a history test and work with a group on a math project.

As Bill discovers in carrying out his plans, he experiences much less stress than before as he tackles the “small” daily writing tasks he has assigned himself. On the day he does his brainstorming for Essay 1, he does not feel pressured by the fact that he still needs to write and revise the essay—he knows the time-slots for those tasks are already carved out in his calendar and he will be able to address those items on the designated dates. Let’s look at the products of two of Bill’s writing process tasks:

### Brainstorming Sheet:

1. The Sun Also Rises—Why this title?
2. Jake seems tough but does cry and feel bad often.
3. Brett shaky—an alcoholic?
4. Jake’s wound—mysterious, his groin
5. Bullfights—gory but exciting; but gets ruined for Jake
6. World War I
7. Party-time all the time
8. But the characters don’t always like each other—Jake and Robert’s fight, Mike can’t stand Robert, Brett sleeps with three different guys
9. Brett and Jake—the status of their relationship?
10. Mike is bankrupt
11. Jake is a journalist
12. Jake goes to church but can’t focus
13. Brett says she can’t pray
14. Loss of faith
15. Bill seems less messed up than the rest
16. Romero’s innocence and youth
17. Montoya—aficionado, wants to protect Romero
18. The loud music and fireworks
19. The ending—what will happen now?

Jake’s wound; everyone’s wounds

Loss of faith and hope

More general—is the novel optimistic or not?

### Essay 1 Working Thesis and Basic Outline:

Working thesis: The novel is not optimistic because Hemingway is emphasizing how badly war can damage our world, as it has for these characters. Focus on certain metaphors to prove that this is the novel’s message.

* 1. Jake’s wound
     1. What it reveals about Jake
        1. Physical effects
        2. Psychological effects
     2. What it says as a metaphor for the other characters’ “injuries”
        1. They avoid really talking

i. They stay drunk all the time

* 1. Bull fight—One of the last “sacred” things for Jake before it gets sullied
     1. Montoya
     2. Romero
     3. Like loss of faith in everything else

In Chapter 5, we saw Bill’s final draft of the essay. He did much work between composing the tentative outline, above, and completing the full, revised essay. With his task-list broken down and carefully scheduled, he was able to give each phase the attention and time necessary to produce a well-argued final essay.

# Determining an Effective Essay Structure

One common misconception students entertain when they approach literary analysis essays is the idea that the structure of the essay should follow the structure of the literary work. The events of short stories, novels, and plays are often related chronologically, in linear order from the moment when the first event occurs to the moment of the last. Yet, it can be awkward to write a literary analysis using the story’s chronology as a basic structure for your own essay. Often, this approach leads to an essay that simply summarizes the literary work. Since a literary analysis paper should avoid summary for summary’s sake, the writer should avoid an essay structure that results in that pattern: *And then Brett goes to San Sebastian with Robert Cohn, and then she returns in time to meet her fiancé Mike Campbell, and then*….

Note that in Bill’s essay on *The Sun Also Rises*, he decided to focus on two significant metaphors and to dedicate a major section of his paper to each. He does not mention Brett’s trip to San Sebastian at all since it does not pertain directly to the paper’s discussion of the metaphors. How *does* he determine the paper’s arrangement? Why does he discuss the metaphor of Jake’s wound before that of the tainted bull fights? In the novel, we do learn of Jake’s wound first, and according to Bill, this metaphor helps establish the theme of psychological wounds caused by the war. So, chronology does influence the arrangement of the paper to some extent, but it is not the primary factor in the paper’s structure. Rather than beginning his paper with a description of Jake’s wound and then moving on to relate Brett’s trip to San Sebastian with Robert, the ensuing antics of the group in Paris, their journey to Spain, etc., on through the list of the novel’s plot events, Bill only includes the plot details supportive to his point, first illustrating the irreversible wounds of the group, represented by Jake’s war-wound, and second examining the spoiled bull fights representing the group’s irreparable loss of faith and hope. The arrangement of the paper does not *reject* chronological order simply for the sake of doing so—Bill relates the events in the sequence of their occurrence when it is reasonable. However, it is his focus on the two metaphors that provides the basic structure for his paper.

Similarly, in Katherine Jones’s essay arguing that Brett Ashley is not a monster but a woman caught between two ideologies, she structures the paper this way:

1. Brett Ashley as sympathetic character in spite of some readers’ disapproval of her behavior
   1. Description of Brett’s unconventional ways
   2. Signs that her rebellion takes its toll on her
      1. Alcohol
      2. Promiscuity
      3. Alienation and despair
2. Conclusion: Her behavior is understandable given her challenging circumstances

Like Bill, Katherine structures her paper by arranging the major points logically: The description of Brett’s nontraditional behavior comes first in the essay’s body because it helps set up the points that follow, points supporting Katherine’s argument that Brett’s struggles illuminate her very human, and thus understandable, reactions to her challenges.

If chronology is not the primary structural factor in setting up a literary analysis paper, what is? You might consider the following hints in arranging the points of your own essay:

1. What *are* your major points? In Bill’s essay, he explores *two important metaphors*; in Katherine’s she examines (a) *Brett’s unconventionality* and then (b) *evidence* that her nontraditional behavior is *more than simple pleasure-seeking*, seen in (i) her *alcoholism*, (ii) her *promiscuity*, and (iii) her *expressions of despair*. In Marion Velis’s essay “Clinging to Love: Theodore Roethke’s ‘My Papa’s Waltz’,” printed in Chapter 2, her major points focus on Roethke’s use of *rhythm*, the poem’s *point of view*, and its *controlling metaphor*. These major points should form the main organizing components of the essay.
2. What order will *most effectively lead the reader* to your perspective on this subject? In each of the essays mentioned above, the first point of discussion helps to set up the paper. These writers work to *draw in* and *orient* the reader, first with the introduction and then, further, in the second body paragraph. Conversely, the *final point* of the paper’s body should be one that helps to “clinch” the paper’s argument or end it “with a bang” just before the conclusion reiterates the overarching argument in the essay’s final lines.
3. Paragraph breaks should (a) cue the reader regarding shifts in focus (hence Bill begins a new paragraph when he finishes discussion of Jake’s wound and starts his exploration of the spoiled bull fights) and (b) break down ideas into small enough chunks that the reader does not lose sight of the currently emphasized point (thus Katherine breaks her discussion of Brett’s *need to cope* into separate paragraphs on *alcohol abuse*, *promiscuity*, and *expressions of Brett’s despair*). On the other hand, in an academic essay, the paragraphs should not seem “choppy.” Rather each should be long enough to develop its point thoroughly before shifting to the next.

The literary analysis paper can be written with examination of only the primary source, or, as we will discuss in the next chapter, you may integrate into your argument the perspectives of other scholars (secondary sources). Regardless, *your own findings* from your analysis of the primary text should be a priority in your interpretation of the work. Analytical skills are invaluable as you explore any subject, investigating the subject by breaking it down and looking closely at how it functions. Finding patterns in your observations, then, helps you to interpret your analysis and communicate to others how you came to your conclusions about the subject’s meaning and/or effect. As you make your case to the readers, it is crucial that you make it clear how your perspective is relevant to them. Ideally, they will come away from your argument intrigued by the new insights you have revealed about the subject.