

# Writing a Literary Analysis

---

A literary analysis is often referred to as “literary criticism.” When you write a literary analysis, or criticism, you’re not really critiquing, per se. Instead, you’re looking at a piece of literature through a critical lens, trying to understand something about the piece itself. As a literary critic, you offer readers a new way to look at a piece of literature, you incorporate the views of other scholars, and ultimately, you encourage readers to look at the text in a new way.

Part of your goal in writing a literary analysis is to demonstrate your critical thinking skills. You’re also showing that you understand how to tie outside elements, like supporting quotes, into a persuasive argument.

## Check on These Elements before You Begin Writing

You’ll need to check on a couple of elements before you begin:

- **Find out how long your professor wants the paper to be.**  
Length requirements have more to do with the development of your idea than they do with the number of pages you need to write. If your professor asks you to write a five page paper, he or she means that it will take you about five pages worth of writing to sufficiently develop your idea and to support your thesis to meet the requirements of the assignment.
- **Ask if your professor wants you to follow a particular format.**  
Most academic disciplines (what you’d refer to as your “major”) have some type of style guide that scholars of that discipline follow. These style guides help you to format your paper and to cite your sources properly. University and college libraries usually have digital copies of style guides, so you can access them online rather than purchasing a copy of your own. However, if you’re writing a paper for a class in your major, you should consider getting a copy of the style guide for your own reference.

You’ll probably use MLA format for a literary analysis, but ask anyway just to make sure.

Some professors deduct points if you don’t follow the appropriate format.

- **Ask if your professor will read your drafts of your paper before it’s due.**  
Some professors do this, others don’t. You’ll lose nothing by asking.

## Acknowledging Generally Accepted Facts about a Literary Work

Here’s a statement of fact:

Many scholars find Charles Dickens’s novel *The Old Curiosity Shop* too sentimental to take it seriously.

Here's another statement of fact, including a different aspect of the same topic:  
Oscar Wilde claimed, "One must have a heart of stone to read the death of Nell without laughing" (Schlicke 426).

Now let's take the facts and incorporate them into the beginning of an arguable thesis. Almost more than any of Dickens's other characters, Little Nell has suffered at the hands of literary critics. Mark Spilka, among others, has called her nothing more than "a sentimental textual blur" (Cox 174). Oscar Wilde claimed, "One must have a heart of stone to read the death of Nell without laughing" (Schlicke 426). The relative lack of scholarly attention paid to Nell over the last decade is a testament to the ridicule in which she is frequently held.

We've acknowledged some facts about the work we're examining in our paper. Doing this makes us seem knowledgeable about the piece, and it also shows that we're aware of how other scholars view it. We've laid the groundwork for an arguable thesis.

### **Formulating an Arguable Thesis**

Think of your paper as a court case—your job is to support your thesis with solid facts so that the reader has no choice but to accept your argument as a possible option, even if the reader doesn't necessarily agree with what you've said. Remember that juries usually base their rulings on facts, not on beliefs, even in highly controversial and emotionally-charged cases. Your professor will view your paper the same way.

Support your argument with facts from the text itself, with comments from other scholars who agree with your viewpoint, with comments from scholars with whom you disagree, and with other pertinent scholarship.

Now that we've acknowledged the facts about the literary piece we're examining in our analysis, we can move on to formulating an arguable thesis:

*The Old Curiosity Shop*, Dickens's fourth novel, is more than simple sentimental hogwash. Although the novel is often a gentle pastoral picaresque, there is something far more sinister going on – Little Nell is driven to wander, in part, by her budding sexuality. Three of the themes of the novel – wandering, insomnia, and fatigue – make her death a given from the opening pages. Little Nell emerges not as a timid, sickly little girl, but as a uniquely assertive, brave heroine.

Look at those three things we listed in the third sentence—wandering, insomnia, and fatigue. We've just given the reader a kind of "road map" for the rest of the paper.

### **Gathering Material to Support the Thesis**

Before we get started with using our supporting information, let's briefly discuss how you should go about gathering that information in the first place. We'll need to think about

- Using appropriate sources for finding supporting evidence
- Learning about journals related to your topic
- Consulting with a reference librarian

### Using Appropriate Sources for Finding Supporting Evidence

Let's talk briefly about using appropriate sources for finding supporting evidence. Now that you're a college student, this is more important than ever. Students often want to use sources like Wikipedia and Spark Notes to get information. Although these sources contain a great deal of information that can serve as a jumping off point for your support, neither one of them are scholarly enough to be appropriate for college-level writing. Instead, use more authoritative sources like

- Journals articles
- Noted authorities on your topic (your professor can point you in the right direction on this)

### Learning about Journals Related to Your Topic

Ask your professor if there are any journals that you should consult. If you are an English major, you need to learn about these journals so you'll be knowledgeable about scholarship in your chosen field. Learning about these journals will help you not only with this assignment, but they'll also help you as you move forward into the job market. People who know about publications in their field have industry awareness, marketplace knowledge, and understanding of their competition, three things that will give them a distinct advantage when they start applying to graduate programs or interviewing for jobs.

### Consulting with a Reference Librarian

If you're not sure where to start, go to your campus library and ask to speak to one of the reference librarians. Reference librarians are one of the greatest untapped resources on college campuses—they specialize in locating information. They won't do your research for you, but they can point you in the right direction. Many college libraries offer "reference by appointment," where you schedule an appointment to meet privately with a reference librarian, free of charge. Take advantage of this service—it can change the course of your college career in terms of the invaluable information you'll receive.

Now that we've learned about appropriate sources, related journals, and reference librarians, we can start learning about

- Citing your sources
- Using quotes of appropriate length
- Anchoring your quotes
- Explaining how the quote relates to your argument

### Citing Your Sources

Of course, you'll need to properly cite the sources for your quotes. The way you do it is dependent on the style guide you're supposed to use for this assignment. Make sure you've asked your professor which style guide is appropriate for your paper.

Another thing to keep in mind—when in doubt, cite your source. Many professors use websites like TurnItIn.com, which make it easy to spot plagiarism. If the words you put in your paper aren't your own, cite your source, even if you've tried to paraphrase instead of including lots of quotes. In this handout, we use MLA format.

### Using Quotes of an Appropriate Length

Many professors see long passages as the student's attempt to "pad" a paper without really analyzing the information. An argumentative paper is just as much about your ability to adequately explain *why* you interpret the argument as you do as it is about providing support for your argument.

Do your best to use short snippets of quotes rather than including long passages. Including long passages means your reader is doing most of the work because the reader has to figure out why you included this passage. As the writer, you must explain why this quote is relevant to your argument. If you find yourself thinking "they'll know what I mean," you're dead wrong. It's your job as the writer to explain exactly why you've used that quote, and how it relates to your argument.

Realize that you may not end up using all the information you gather. This is just a natural part of the process. Choose the best, most substantial and authoritative support that you find. If you cannot choose, try to rank the information from the best to the least convincing, and then use the top three quotes.

### Anchoring Quotes into Your Sentences

You might be tempted to just cut and paste quotes into your paper. However, quotes cannot stand alone. A college-level writer finds a way to incorporate quotes into a sentence of his or her own commentary, which anchors the quote. Anchoring quotes into your own sentences is a more sophisticated technique that makes you a more masterful writer. We'll talk more about this technique in a moment.

### Explaining How the Quote Relates to Your Argument

Comment on each quote you use immediately after you include it. Explain why it's important. Don't just expect your reader to see how the quote fits in—go the distance for your reader and tell him or her how *you* think this quote fits into your argument. If you need more than one sentence of explanation, that's fine. Do what it takes to flesh out your argument so your reader understands precisely what you mean. That's *your* job as the writer.

Your argument must be logical, sincere, and informed. Treat your readers like intelligent, reasonable adults, and explain to them precisely why they should see things your way and exactly how the quoted information supports your argument.

Now let's get down to the business of supporting that argument. We do this by

- discussing facts that support your thesis
- examining ideas that contradict your thesis

Our ultimate goal is persuading the reader that based on the evidence, the thesis is either correct, or that the thesis is a viable option.

### Discussing Facts that Support Your Thesis

Let's take another look at our thesis:

*The Old Curiosity Shop*, Dickens's fourth novel, is more than simple sentimental hogwash. Although the novel is often a gentle pastoral picaresque, there is something far more sinister going on – Little Nell is driven to wander, in part, by her budding sexuality. Three of the themes of the novel – wandering, insomnia, and fatigue – make her death a given from the opening pages. Little Nell emerges not as a timid, sickly little girl, but as a uniquely assertive, brave heroine.

Let's move on to some information that will “jump start” our argument:

In discussing “texts of compulsive recurrence,” Peter Brooks states that “If repetition is mastery, movement from the passive to the active, and if mastery is an assertion of control over what man must in fact submit to . . . [then] repetition, taking us back again over the same ground, could have to do with the choice of ends” (Brooks 98).

Now let's incorporate that quote into our argument:

In discussing “texts of compulsive recurrence,” Peter Brooks states that “If repetition is mastery, movement from the passive to the active, and if mastery is an assertion of control over what man must in fact submit to . . . [then] repetition, taking us back again over the same ground, could have to do with the choice of ends” (98). Nell's journey definitely qualifies as a text of “compulsive recurrence” since virtually every episode sees her working through some aspect of the “nightmare” her life has become. She is unable to rest until all of the information and symbolic imagery of her dreams are untangled, and every destination is a repetition of some aspect of her initial bad dream that leads her to the ultimate conclusion that there is no escape.

Notice how Peter Brooks's statements are incorporated into a sentence of our own commentary. It's just that easy. Quotes that we've anchored into our own commentary indicate a much more sophisticated technique than simply placing quotes in our paper where they'll just float around. You've distinguished yourself as a writer who truly understands how to use supporting evidence effectively. Notice that we haven't assumed that our reader can follow our thought process. We've gone the distance by explaining how Peter Brooks's statement relates to our thesis.

### Examining Ideas that Contradict Your Argument

As you're writing, you always want to spend more time supporting your point of view than in examining the opposition. However, to have a strong argumentative paper, you have to confront the opposition head on. Doing so strengthens your argument because it demonstrates that you understand both sides. If you agree with something the opposition says, acknowledge it. This makes you appear open-minded.

Check to see if the opposition has made any faulty or provocative assumptions. Here's an example:

Gareth Cordery says there is a distinct possibility that [the grandfather's] "gambling is a symbolic substitute for sexual activity" (48), which makes the subsequent theft of Nell's money a "symbolic rape" (43).

What you have to do next is to examine why the opposition's argument is wrong or why it isn't as compelling as it seems. Let's incorporate Gareth Cordery's quote into a supporting paragraph, making sure that we also comment on why the quote contradicts or supports our argument.

The grandfather's reaction is so strongly evocative of sexual arousal that Gareth Cordery says there is a distinct possibility that "gambling is a symbolic substitute for sexual activity" (48), which makes the subsequent theft of Nell's money a "symbolic rape" (43). While it may stretch credulity to imply that Nell's grandfather is sexually attracted to his own grandchild, it is indisputable that his gambling does put Nell at risk and is a great violation of her innocence and trust.

As you continue to build your argument, plan to put your most compelling support last, since this is the final time you can persuade your reader before concluding your paper.

### Concluding Your Argument

**Most of all, your conclusion should be short and to the point.** You want to conclude your argument without closing the possibility that your reader will want to continue discussing your idea after he or she has finished reading.

Before you start to write

- Think about how all the pieces of evidence you've supplied fit together
- Help the reader to see the broader implications of your argument
- Tie the information together so that your argument seems simple

You can conclude your paper by doing one or more of the following:

- Echo the first paragraph of the paper to draw your reader's attention back to the initial argument
- Show your reader what's been gained through your exploration of your argument
- Redefine the key points of your thesis
- Conclude with a quote that underscores your main point
- Conclude with an image that helps your reader visualize your main point

Here's our conclusion:

The secrets of sexuality and her continuous pursuit by a multitude of roguish characters have killed both Nell and her potential to grow into the stereotypical ideal of mature Victorian femininity. Ultimately, Nell dies, not because Dickens "kills" her off, but because she is tired of struggling, tired of secrets, and tired of the subsequent sorrow the truth has brought her.

### Some Additional Tips

Assume your reader has read, but not memorized, the text. Don't spend the entirety of your paper retelling the story. This is an analysis—not a book report.

Use active voice. The easiest way to achieve this is to start each sentence with an actor (someone who is doing something) and follow that with a verb. Just for reference's sake, the passive verbs are any form of the verb "to be," including: *am, are, is, was, were, be, being, been*.

Define any terms you think your reader may not know, and consistently use the same name for that term. For instance, in the example paper in this handout, we explained the term "compulsive recurrence."

Consider writing your paper first and then adding in the supporting quotes. This way you'll know the ideas in the paper are yours.

Realize that you may not use all of the supporting evidence you've found. That's just a normal part of the writing process.

Avoid sweeping statements like "since the dawn of time"; statements like this are rarely true. They undermine your argument.

Change any open-ended, or rhetorical, questions into statements. These questions are risky because your reader may answer the question differently than you anticipate they will. Then you've lost your argument.

Dictionary definitions as an introduction are not original. Professors have seen this so often that they'll want to poke their eyeballs out if they see them again. More important, they'll want to poke out *your* eyeballs.



### Use This Checklist

Let's use this checklist to see if our supporting evidence helps us follow our goals.

Have you

- ✓ Used appropriate sources?
- ✓ Used journals related to your topic when possible?
- ✓ Cited your sources, even if you've merely paraphrased the source?
- ✓ Used quotes of an appropriate length?
- ✓ Anchored quotes into sentences of your own commentary?
- ✓ Explained how the quote relates to your argument?
- ✓ Used facts to support your argument?
- ✓ Examined ideas that contradict your argument?
- ✓ Put your most compelling supporting information last?

## Works Cited

- Brooks, Peter. *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1984.
- Cordery, Gareth. "The Gambling Grandfather in *The Old Curiosity Shop*." *Literature and Psychology* 33:1 (1987): 43-61.
- Cox, Don Richard, ed. *Sexuality in Victorian Literature*. Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 1984.
- Dickens, Charles. *The Old Curiosity Shop*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1984.
- Jackson, Lisa Hartsell. "Little Nell's Nightmare: Sexual Awakening and Insomnia in Dickens's *The Old Curiosity Shop*," *Dickens Studies Annual* 39 (2008): 43-58.
- Schlicke, Paul, ed. *The Oxford Reader's Companion to Dickens*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999.