

Tips and Techniques for Analysis

Goal: To “broaden and deepen your understanding of literature” (Sierra College qtd. in McFarland) and to learn how to think and to challenge your assumptions.

Before You Begin:

- Read the text thoroughly and annotate it.
- Make sure you understand the plot – if you cannot follow what happens in the text, you cannot analyze it.
- Take your time choosing your subject and arriving at the thesis.
- If your preparation is thorough, the essay tends to write itself.

Pick a Sign

First, you need a subject/sign/idea/topic/observation/textual phenomenon/pattern to investigate and argue about (all of these terms refer to the same thing. This handout will use “sign”).

Pick a sign in the text.

It must be specific and non-obvious.

Use the VOICE test: is it **V**isible, **O**riginal, **I**mportant, **C**omplex, and shows your **E**nthusiasm?

Example:

The red slippers in Wizard of Oz [Specific, yes, but very obvious. Try again]
Wicked Witch of East owned slippers and Wicked Witch of West wants them [Plot]
Glinda gives the red slippers to Dorothy [Plot]
Ownership of the red slippers [Ok, we’re getting somewhere]
Transfer of ownership of the red slippers [Bingo]

Steer clear of general, abstract terms (Hope, Death, Love, Society) or broad categories (Women’s clothing, Civil War). Essays focused on these things tend to be short, repetitious, lack detail, generalize, and are uninteresting.

Is your sign clearly present in the text?

(i.e., do you have quotes in which your sign appears?)

If not, you may need to choose a different sign. You cannot write an essay without quotes from the primary text.

Is your sign unlikely, unique, or not covered already hundreds of times before?

If you choose a sign because you think it will be easy to write, you might want to choose a different one. “Easy” signs lead to uninteresting essays that tend to generalize and tell the reader something he/she already knows, and they do not investigate something interesting and original.

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For example:

Your sign should not just be “war” in Andrew Hudgins’s *The Lost War*.

A) “War” is in the title, so it is not original or unexpected.

B) The word “war” is very broad, and every reader has a different idea of what “war” is and what it means.

So, instead increase the specificity/detail/preciseness of this idea.

Look for the various instances in the text where “war” occurs.

Now, how can you specifically define “war” as it appears in context?
(i.e., death of soldiers, firing guns, killing squirrels).

Once You Have Your Sign

Now you need to ask yourself questions that examine the sign and deepen your understanding of the text.

The answers to these questions will answer your “So What?” and lead to your argumentative thesis statement.

Several Driving Theoretical Questions (DTQs):

- What are the multiple significances of the sign? (i.e., what does the sign mean?)
- Why is the sign important?
- How does the sign relate to the text?
- How does the sign function in the text?
- Why does the sign function in the text in this way?
- How does the sign relate to our broader culture and society?
- So what?

So, following our example of *Transfer of ownership of red slippers*:

1. What are the multiple significances of the transfer of ownership of red slippers? Why is this transfer important?
 - a. Red shoes spark, which have the power to fend off Wicked Witch (W.W.), so shoes represent power; therefore, Glinda gives power to Dorothy.
 - b. Transfer to Dorothy is unwilling, so transfer signifies Glinda imposing her will on another person.
 - c. Though Glinda took shoes off dead Witch of East, W.W. cannot take them off Dorothy, so transfer signifies W.W.’s loss of power.
 - d. Transfer circumvents inheritance when W.W. is refused her sister’s property, just like how Americans lost their inheritance and wealth in Great Depression.

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2. How does this transfer relate to the overall story of the Wizard of Oz?
 - a. Dorothy gets a magical object in the beginning, which aids her further acquisition of friends. [Illogical – inheritance does not give you more friends; Try again!]
 - b. Gives Dorothy the power to go home when she clicks her heels together. Therefore, she transfers ownership of *herself* from Oz back to Kansas. This shows a change of the power of transfer from Glinda forcing Dorothy to Dorothy choosing for herself.
 - c. So, *Wizard of Oz* works to give Dorothy the tools to make her own choices and to take control/responsibility of her own life.
- ✓ Make sure that you do not stick with the first answer you come up with for each question and move on. Pause after each answer you come up with and ask, “What else?”
 - ✓ Generally, your second, third, or fourth answers to each question are better, more complex, and analytical than the first thing that springs to your mind. The first answer you have will almost always be obvious and shallow (i.e., simple and uninteresting).
 - ✓ Try to write out all of the thoughts you have with each answer, because these ideas will build your paragraphs later. That is, write out a paragraph or series of sentences detailing your answer to each question. By the time you write your essay, you just need to clean up your answers and add in quotes to create paragraphs.
 - ✓ Make sure that your analysis/answers to these questions do not simply reiterate plot (i.e., prove that Dorothy goes to see the Wizard of Oz – we already know this).

Overarching Argument

Once you have your answers to the DTQs, you need to see if an overall theme/idea/argument has emerged.

Focus more on the answers that are unexpected and complex (bring together several ideas). If you can see an underlying idea that ties most of your answers together, that is the beginning of your thesis statement.

If you do not see an underlying idea, that is okay. See if you can connect 3-4 answers, beginning with the least complex (most often, the shortest) and ending with the most complex (most often, the longest). Base your thesis statement on the most complex answer.

You do not need to use all the answers you have brainstormed. Just the best. If you have problems figuring out your best answers, ask your professor or a Writing Center tutor.

McFarland, Mitzi. Homepage. U of West Georgia, Carrollton. 20 March 2009.
<www.westga.edu/~mmcfar>.