

Literary Analysis as Prewriting

by
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I use the five-paragraph essay with literature as an evaluation tool to gauge students' writing ability, reading comprehension, and understanding of literary devices. When I first started teaching, I would give students one essay question to answer. I soon realized that offering only a single choice limited some students' responses. At times, their essays seemed forced – like they weren't really “into” the topic or didn't fully “feel” the direction the question led them.

Worried that I was suppressing their personal insights and observations, I began providing several questions from which to choose. The varied responses were refreshing, and having the opportunity to choose gave students more freedom. But then another issue surfaced. During class discussion of essay responses, students spoke strongly about aspects of the stories that couldn't be investigated by the questions I'd provided. I wanted to open the writing process up to encompass all of their ideas, but I knew I couldn't simply say “write about whatever you want.” As students were still growing as writers, they needed and desired direction.

So, like all frustrated teachers, I poured through various texts and internet sites looking for a way to solve the problem. What I realized, when reading about teaching writing, was that there are steps we, as teachers, go through when formulating any type of assessment. We focus on what's important regarding the subject matter at hand. In English, we analyze the literature and decide what aspect of the piece will best guide written response and tell us if the students learned what was desired.

And then it hit me . . . why couldn't I teach the students to do that themselves? What emerged is what I simply call Literary Analysis. It's nothing I can take credit for, because all English teachers use this process when developing writing assessments. In order to communicate the process, I came up with the chart below:

Literary focus	Considerations/Questions	Analysis	Support/Examples
Title	--the title may present theme or introduce the main topic, a motif, or controlling symbol		
Point of View	--does the POV shape what you know or how you feel about the story? --is the narrator objective or unreliable?		
Setting	--the setting can be symbolic, create mood / atmosphere --does the setting add to the work? does it matter?		
Story Structure	--plot development --examine the way the parts fit together to create meaning --what's the time sequence? --are there flashbacks or subplots? what are their		
Character Study	--what types of characters are present? what purpose do they have? --consider dialogue --what motivates characters? --are there foils?		
Literary Elements	--irony, foreshadowing, imagery, motifs, symbolism --which are significant and why? --how do they create meaning in the story?		
Theme	--what is the story saying about human nature or life? *don't confuse subject or conflict with theme		

I instruct the students to read the selection twice—once for pleasure and again to analyze. As students complete the chart, they begin to see what literary aspects are significant in the story. Because we all bring different experiences to our reading, individual interpretations of literature vary. Obviously, not all charts are the same. That's what makes the process so effective; it allows for interpretive freedom and asks for support for opinions.

By guiding the analysis themselves, students develop their own questions and essay topics. The students are empowered and a new level of comprehension is achieved. The essays I have received using this process have been more thoughtful and thought-provoking. As the students grow into truly independent thinkers and writers, I get the benefit of learning from their personal and often unique insights into the literature.