

Literary Analysis vs. Plot Summary vs. Plot Interpretation

Many times students are expected to write a literary analysis of a theme(s), qualities of a main or minor character(s), or other key points, only to end up writing a plot summary of a literary work or its interpretation of the plot. Knowing the differences between the terms plot summary, plot interpretation, and literary analysis may help you to correctly write your assignment.

Plot summary:

A plot summary is a condensed description of the story in a novel, poem, short story, play, film or other piece of storytelling. It does not provide a review of performance or contain the opinions of the author. It also does not retell the complete story, which is why a summary does not contain all the detailed information about the main characters, replay the unfolding drama, or review all of the twists and turns in the plot.

The point of a summary is to explain, or summarize, the story. Therefore, there is no discussion of deeper meaning of the literary work, which is what an analysis is.

Plot interpretation:

An interpretation of the plot is just that – an interpretation. Interpretation often occurs when writing literature papers about poetry or complex works such as epic poems. The student interprets the *meaning* of the literary work, but simply stops there. Instead of trying to analyze the deeper meaning(s) of the literary work, which is what analyzing is, the student interprets what he or she believes the author is trying to portray.

Literary Analysis:

A literary analysis is examining the different elements of a piece of literature to help you better appreciate and understand its work as a whole.

This process requires you to use the sharpened, focused expression of thought and study into the literary work, especially a narrowed section of it.

Analyzing literature sharpens your perceptions and increases your critical thinking abilities.

The goal of a literary analysis is to broaden and deepen your understanding of a work of literature.

The process of analyzing a literary work is to carefully examine and sometimes evaluate an aspect of it. Professors often provide topics of discussion, or ask questions in their assignment instructions to guide students on what literary elements needed to be analyzed and discussed.

This requires you to break the literary work's subject (such as the theme, qualities of a character, events, etc.) down into its component parts, then carefully analyze in accordance to the professor's requirements. This process means that you need to go beyond superficial reading of the literary work to delve more deeply into meaning and understanding.

For instance, an analysis of a poem might deal with the different types of images or with the relationship between the poetic form and content of the work.

If you were to analyze (discuss and explain) a play, you might analyze the relationship between a subplot and the main plot, or you might analyze the character flaw of the tragic hero by tracing how it is revealed through the acts of the play.

Analyzing a short story might include identifying a particular theme (like the difficulty of making the transition from adolescence to adulthood) and showing how the writer suggests this theme through the point of view from which the story is told; or you might also explain how the main character's attitude toward women is revealed through his dialogue and/or actions.

Other ideas for analyzing literature could include:

Focusing on what the author accomplishes or fails to accomplish with the text.

Focusing on elements that work together within a text that build towards the climax or conclusion.

Explaining how or why a literary work does something.

REMEMBER: there is no total right or wrong in your analytical ideas unless you know the author's original intent for writing the literary work. The key to writing a literary analysis is how well you identify, develop, and support your ideas.

Steps toward writing a literary analysis essay:

1. Begin by development of an idea. This idea can be about a specific part of the literary work, its author, writing style, genre, or elements such as theme, tone, plot, characterization, setting, etc.
2. Centralize this idea by writing the thesis statement. The thesis forms the foundation upon which all supporting ideas will derive. Therefore, these supporting ideas will form the body of the paper and will always go directly back to the thesis statement.
3. Discuss and analyze each supporting idea at a time. Ideally, each idea is discussed in one or two paragraphs.
4. Find evidence *to support* (not explain) your ideas. Evidence is derived from the following examples from the original literary work:

- Direct quotations

- Summaries of scenes, events, etc.
- Paraphrases of long quotes

5. Find and use secondary sources if the professor allows and/or requires them. Secondary sources can consist of the following:

- A book or article that discusses the text you are discussing
- A book or article that discusses a theory related to the argument you are making
- A book or article that discusses the social and historical context of the text you are discussing

6. Ensure you analyze throughout your entire essay, not at the end of discussion or only in the conclusion paragraph.

7. Draw your analytical conclusion in the closing paragraph. This conclusion should suggest the significance, or the reason the reader should care, about your topic. Again, there is no total right or wrong conclusion in whatever you decide. The key is to ensure your conclusion has been discussed and supported in the body of the paper as introduced by the thesis statement.