Literary Analysis Research Paper

by

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The type of research paper required in most sophomore literature courses is generally referred to as a **literary analysis research paper** because its focus must be on an element of the literary work's construction as a piece of literature — for example, an element such as the work's *characters* or *conflict* or *symbolism* or *theme*, or perhaps two or more related literary elements [such as the interrelated elements of conflict development and theme, or symbolism's contribution to the creation of theme(s)]. It would **not** focus on such ideas as the author's life (biography), the historical events and beliefs of the period in which it was written (historical and/or sociological aspects of the work), or psychoanalysis of the characters (psychology), as these are not elements of literary analysis, though passing reference to one or more of these is usually acceptable. If there's any doubt regarding the acceptability of a particular idea you're considering, it's essential to consult with the professor before proceeding further in order to avoid wasted time on an inappropriate writing topic.

While individual approaches to a research paper involving literary analysis may vary, one standard approach can be presented as follows:

YOUR IDEAS	+ TEXTUAL EVIDENCE	+ RESEARCH	= LITERARY ANALYSIS RESEARCH PAPER
about the work of literature (presented in the form of a thesis opinion)	from the work supporting your analytic ideas and thesis opinion	to gather and incorporate critical works of scholarly analysis that relate to or support your thesis opinion	

This 'formula' for producing an effective literary analysis research paper can be detailed by the following process, or series of steps taken to achieve the ultimate goal.

Selecting an Author and Literary Work

Select an appropriate **author** (one whose works fall within the time parameters of the literature course in question) and one (possibly two, if brief) **literary work(s)** to analyze. For example, one novel/novella or two brief short stories would generally be selected to produce a research paper of 1500 or more words. In courses where long, complex works are covered (such as Homer's *Iliad* or Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*), it is probably wise to attempt to analyze only a particular portion of the work. Again, consult with the professor about an appropriate choice of work or portion thereof. It is also helpful, though not necessary, to have previously read the literary work(s). This allows you to begin right away to direct your focus toward particular elements of the work(s) as you are re-reading because you already have familiarity with the basic plot and characters.

Read and Re-read

Read (re-read?) the selected work(s), keeping a close watch for the particular literary element that interests you. You might choose to analyze the character and conflicts of Huckleberry Finn, for instance, or satirical devices in *Gulliver's Travels* or theme and symbolism in *The Scarlet Letter.* As you read and note the presence of the particular element(s) in the work, you should begin to formulate mentally (and take notes on) your ideas on it. These ideas will later be turned into a **working thesis or opinion** about the work and the element(s).

Taking Notes

Take careful notes for each instance in the work where the literary element seems present. These places in the work will be used later (when writing the paper) as the **textual evidence** necessary to properly support your analytic opinion and thus produce a convincing argument for your thesis. As you take these notes (in whatever fashion is most comfortable or useful for you), be certain that you record accurate quotes and page numbers (for proper MLA—**Modern Language Association**-- citations when

writing the paper). Carelessness in this area can affect the clarity of the paper, as well as result in unintentional plagiarism.

Literary Focus

When you begin to encounter later instances in the work where you detect the literary element (or see them in the other work being analyzed, if analyzing more than one work of literature), **compare the separate instances**, cross-referencing them by page numbers in your notes. For example, if it occurs to you that the author is using a **particular object** (for example, Faith and her pink ribbons in "Young Goodman Brown" or the Bibles in "Good Country People") **to symbolize an abstract concept**, the cross-referenced notes will allow you to more easily recognize and discuss the author's use of **the symbol**, perhaps forming the basis for a working outline. It might also allow you to recognize the symbol's **function** in the work (i.e., does it help the author direct focus toward a theme? Is it assisting in character development in some way?).

Organizing Your Ideas and Notes into a Working Thesis

When through reading the work(s)—preferably after multiple readings and substantial note-taking—**assimilate all your ideas and notes into a clear overview**, stated as concisely as possible in an opinion or claim. This will be your **working thesis**. It may change some as you proceed, but it will allow you to better direct your research efforts for appropriate critical analytic support.

A working thesis will be a **complete sentence** that names the author and the literary work(s)—or portion of the work if very lengthy—and makes a clear statement of your opinion to be supported in the paper. For example, the following could be a working thesis about symbolism in the previously mentioned Hawthorne short story:

> **In Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown," the author uses the character Faith to symbolize Goodman Brown's religious faith, in order to suggest a theme that loss of one's religious faith will cause one to question other beliefs as well.**

You'll note that the thesis presents an opinion about both symbolism and theme that its writer would then have to support by offering persuasive proof or evidence from the

story itself, along with the explanations necessary to convince a reader that the opinion is a reasonable one.

Library Search

Begin your library search for appropriate **scholarly critical analytic material** that you can use to support your own analytic discussion in the research paper**. Important note:** Waiting until you have completed your initial efforts at reading and note-taking will make it less likely that your paper will simply present other people's ideas instead of your own. It will also substantially reduce the time and effort involved in research. Because you have read the work(s) of literature by your author and **come to your own conclusions regarding the particular literary element**, you will limit your research efforts to sources that make at least some reference to your topic. And when you are examining these sources, you will be able to more quickly determine their usefulness as support for your argument.

The following represents a possible search pattern in the library:

- **Computer Catalog.** A place to begin your library search will likely be in the computer catalog, where you'll search for the author and his works **as subjects** of books held in that library (or in the library system as a whole). Under each listing, find the Library of Congress information and scan it for references to your topic. Again, this is something you can't do if you don't already have a topic and working thesis because you won't know what to look for and will thus have to look at everything. If a source appears to have potential, list it on a piece of paper or a note card, along with all the information necessary to present it in a research paper. A few minutes spent at this point will save time and effort later on.

- **Anthologies.** Of particular interest in any search of the computer catalog will be listings for **anthologies** of critical scholarly material dealing with your author's work. These anthologies are **not** sources themselves, but **collections of individual articles or excerpts** that may prove useful as sources in your paper. Several major publishing companies offer entire series of critical anthologies

dealing with major authors and their work. Prentice-Hall, for instance, has a series entitled <u>Twentieth Century Views</u>, which covers writers from the modern era.

- **Critical Edition/Casebook.** Similar to the anthology is what is referred to as a 'critical edition' or 'casebook.' What distinguishes these from a simple critical anthology is the inclusion of one or more literary works by the author, as well as scholarly articles or excerpts. Norton publishes a complete line of critical editions on most major authors.

- **Reference Anthologies.** Next you'll wish to check whatever **literary reference works** the library has, consulting the index and finding the author and any listings for articles on the literary work(s) you're analyzing. Companies such as Gale Research and others have greatly simplified the student's research efforts by gathering a variety of critical sources together into convenient bound volumes (anthologies) containing entire scholarly articles (or excerpts) for easy access by students. In addition, there are also **electronic anthologies** or **databases** available through most college libraries. Since the databases are purchased by the library by subscription, these typically can be accessed only by currently enrolled students.

- **Reader's Guides.** Further search might involve reader's guides to periodical literature for listings of articles and essays on your author and his work. The *MLA Bibliography* and the *Cambridge Guide to English Literature* are perhaps the most essential of these for student research, though there are others.

The Working Bibliography

A working bibliography is a list of **critical scholarly sources** you intend to consult as possible analytic support for your thesis opinion. This list will include **all information necessary for an MLA Works Cited page** (author, title, and publishing information), as well as a **brief note or summary** of the source's potential relevance to your research paper (to aid your memory later). A proper working bibliography will usually consist of at least ten potential sources, as some sources may be unable to be

located or have no relevance for your thesis as it develops over the course of drafting. The bibliography will **not** include the literary work(s), though the work(s) will eventually be part of the finished paper's Works Cited page.

Construct a list of as many of these critical articles as possible, excluding those that appear to have no relevance to your topic area. This will be your **working bibliography** for the research paper. You should not change your topic after the working thesis and working bibliography are submitted and approved by your professor, since it almost certainly will be too late to begin research on a different topic.

Avoiding Plagiarism

Locate and gather the critical articles and begin reading them, again taking careful notes (either on note cards or in a notebook) of material you can use from them to support your argument in the paper. **Important note:** It is absolutely essential that a scholar's words or ideas be offered accurately in the paper. Presenting them out of context or in any way distorting them will call all your efforts into question. **Any material used from a scholar's work — whether quoted, paraphrased, or summarized — must be credited within the research paper with a proper MLA citation**. Failure to do so will constitute *plagiarism* (whether unintentional or otherwise), which could cause the research paper to be severely penalized. Intentional plagiarism, if discovered, is cause for a paper to receive a grade as low as a zero, and perhaps an F in the course. Thus, a simple rule of thumb for avoiding plagiarism in a research paper is as follows: **If the ideas or words were not generated in your own head, credit is necessary in the paper**. For information about the proper incorporation and citation of research material, see the later section devoted to those tasks.

Organizing Your Notes

Connect the notes gathered from the critical articles with the appropriate **textual evidence** from the literary work(s). If your note taking has been done on standard note cards all along, this will be a fairly simple process of grouping cards together.

The Rough Draft

Begin the synthesis of a rough draft, clearly stating your thesis opinion in the introduction. In the body of the paper, follow a systematic, well-organized exploration of your argument by presenting:

- your idea clearly explained
- the textual evidence from the work(s) supporting the idea
- the supporting critical analytic material obtained from your research

The previously offered example of a thesis about Hawthorne's use of Faith as a symbol in "Young Goodman Brown" might involve the following material in support, with the MLA in-text citations from the work referring to the Norton anthology, 5th ed., version of the story, and the source citation being from a hypothetical source discussing the work:

Hawthorne very deliberately uses the name "Faith" for Brown's wife so that Brown's words in the story can function as indicators of his internal conflict as he struggles with his decision to go into the forest and engage in the evil ritual. In fact, he's barely left his house and wife before saying to himself, "'Poor little Faith!…What a wretch am I, to leave her on such an errand!'" (1236). Thoughtful readers will soon connect his words with his powerful internal struggle to remain true to his religious faith, though 'leaving it behind' this one night in his life. Critic John Doe suggests that the use of the name "Faith" is a bit obvious to some yet contends, "The name is perhaps not as heavy-handed a symbol on Hawthorne's part as some scholars have suggested, since he was obviously producing his tales for a broad popular audience of his day and not literature scholars of a later era" (54).

In the sample above, the proper approach has been followed, with the writer first presenting a statement of opinion about the symbol, then offering a quote from the work as textual evidence, followed by further analytic discussion, and finally presenting a supporting quote from a research source uncovered.

Important reminder: Make certain that everything (including quotes from the literary work) has the necessary MLA citation.

Revising and Rewriting

Revise/rewrite until the best draft is achieved. Prepare a careful Works Cited page **indicating all literary works and scholarly material used and cited in the paper**. Prepare your final copy. In the package to be turned in, be sure to include your rough draft and highlighted copies of all **cited critical source material**, if required by the professor. Do not include highlighted copies of material quoted from the literary work(s), unless requested.

WORKS CITED PAGE

Any formal paper involving research requires accurate information to be presented regarding the source material being used in the paper, and this is typically offered after the body of the paper in a **Works Cited page**. Preparing an accurate Works Cited page is an essential part of any Modern Language Association-style research paper, and it is even recommended that it be prepared prior to final revisions to the draft to insure complete correspondence between source citations in the paper and the source listing on the Works Cited page. Any discrepancies **must** be corrected before finalizing the paper. In order to properly prepare this page, you must **correctly identify the nature of the research source** in order to determine the appropriate model from among the many possible samples encountered in any MLA guide, including this one. Following the wrong sample model will result in confusion, not only on the Works Cited page, but also within the body of the research paper itself. So take your time to properly identify the source, and if you're uncertain, consult your professor and show him/her the source itself.

- Unlike a Working Bibliography, a Works Cited page includes **only** those scholarly sources and literary works **actually used and cited** in the body of the paper (thus the term "Works Cited"). And these sources and works are **always listed alphabetically**

by the author's (or editor's) last name. When a source (perhaps a newspaper article) has no author indicated (anonymous), the listing will be alphabetized by the title.

- You should also be aware that MLA format is generally very abbreviated, or streamlined, in its approach to listing entries so that publication information for books is limited to the **city of publication**, with the state omitted, and the **key name in the publisher name** (for example, Prentice, rather than Prentice-Hall).

- Publishing information is found in nearly all books on the bottom of the book's title page, and the year of publication will be found on the reverse side of the title page. When **multiple cities of publication** are listed, as a general rule, you should select the first one in the list. The choice can be verified by checking against the publisher's address, sometimes found on the reverse side of the title page. When **multiple dates of publication** appear, select the most recent, as that will correspond to the edition in hand.

- When citing a book that has more than one volume or more than one edition, be careful to list that information in the appropriate place.

- For the book title, use the version on the **title page**. For book titles that have **subtitles**, separate the title from the subtitle with a colon, even though the title page does not indicate one. But be aware that many subtitles can be omitted in MLA's streamlined style, unless the subtitle is an essential part of the overall title and its meaning.

- Incorrect punctuation of a title will result in confusion and must therefore be avoided at all costs. The titles of major works (books, epic poems, etc.) are always *italicized* (or underlined if the professor prefers that approach). The titles of lesser works (short stories, essays, or journal articles, etc.) are always placed in quotation marks (which go outside any separating punctuation in the listing).

- Capitalization of titles is also important. Only the key words of the title are usually capitalized, with **articles** (a, an, the) left in lower case. The initial article in a title will, of course, be capitalized.

- Due to the use of computers and the Internet as a common means of accessing source material, current MLA format indicates the nature of the basic medium being accessed: Print or Web, for example.

- MLA format uses a **hanging indentation** for all lines below the first, with the first word of the line being five letters or characters in from the margin.

Sample MLA Works Cited Entries:

- **A book with one author** (fiction or nonfiction)

    McCarthy, Cormac. *No Country for Old Men*. New York: Vintage, 2006. Print.

- **A book by two or three authors** (fiction or nonfiction)

    Burroughs, William, and Allen Ginsberg. *The Yage Letters*. San Francisco: City
        Lights, 1963. Print.

- **A book by more than three authors** ("et al." stands for "and others")

    Johnson, Philip J., et al. *Psychosis in the Modern Male*. Boston: Harley, 1999.
        Print.

- **Two or more books by the same author** (the books will be listed alphabetically by title, with the author's name replaced by three unspaced hyphens, after the first title)

    Hemingway, Ernest. *A Moveable Feast*. New York: Scribner's, 1964. Print.

    - - -. *The Old Man and the Sea*. New York: Scribner's, 1952. Print.

- **A book with an editor** (for multiple editors, follow the same pattern as for authors)

    Arnold, Edwin T., and Dianne C. Luce, eds. *A Cormac McCarthy Companion: The
        Border Trilogy*. Jackson: U P of Mississippi, 2001. Print.

- **A republished book**

    Twain, Mark. *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. 1884. Berkeley: U of California
        P, 1985. Print.

- **An essay in an anthology** (include the pages of the entire essay, not just the ones cited)

    Fussell, Edwin. "Fitzgerald's Brave New World*." F. Scott Fitzgerald: A*

Collection of Critical Essays. Ed. Arthur Mizener. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice,

1963. 43-56. Print.

- **A previously published essay in an anthology** (include data for first publication,

and the abbreviation 'Rpt. in' [Reprinted in])

Carpenter, Frederic I. "Scarlet A Minus." *College English* 5.4 (Jan. 1944): 173-80.

Rpt. in *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism*, Vol. 10. Eds. Laurie Lanzen

Harris and Emily B. Tennyson. Detroit: Gale, 1985. 284-87. Print.

- **More than one essay in the same anthology**   (This is known as a **cross-reference.**)

List the essay alphabetically, with a cross-reference to the anthology, usually by the

editor's last name, followed by the pages from the individual essay. The anthology

is then listed alphabetically with all the necessary publication information.)

Bewley, Marius. "Scott Fitzgerald's Criticism of America." Mizener 125-41.

Mizener, Arthur, ed. *F. Scott Fitzgerald: A Collection of Critical Essays*.   Englewood

Cliffs: Prentice, 1963. Print.

Raleigh, John Henry. "F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*." Mizener 99-103.

- **An introduction, preface, or afterward in a book**

Allen, Hervey. Introduction. *The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe*.

By Edgar Allan Poe. New York: Modern, 1965. v-viii. Print.

- **An essay in a scholarly journal**

Roth, Elizabeth Elam. "Terror and Tragedy: Divergent Roads in the Poetry of

Robert Frost and Joseph Brodsky." *CCTE Studies* 61 (1996): 9-18. Print.

- **A lecture** (Information and ideas obtained during a classroom lecture warrant

citation, just as does the information used from a print or electronic source.)

Johnson, Jonas. "Shakespeare's Parallel Plot Structures." Survey of Brit.

Literature, Eng. Dept., Houston Community College — NW. 20 Oct. 2010.

Lecture.

- **A short story, poem, or play in an anthology**

Poe, Edgar Allan. "The Imp of the Perverse." *The Norton Anthology of*

American Literature. Vol. 1. Ed. Nina Baym. 5th ed. New York: Norton,

1998. 1563-67. Print.

- **More than one short story or poem from the same anthology** (Use a cross-reference, as would be used for multiple critical essays from an anthology, but follow the pattern for 'more than one work by the same author' for listing the works and the author's name.)

Baym, Nina, ed. *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*. Vol. 1. 5th ed.

New York: Norton, 1998. Print.

Hawthorne, Nathaniel. "The Birth-Mark." Baym 1261-73.

- - -. "Rappaccini's Daughter." Baym 1286-1305.

- - -. "Young Goodman Brown." Baym 1236-45.

Citing Electronic Sources

(sources accessed via computer)

The widespread use of the personal computer as a tool for doing scholarly research has created new types of sources necessary to be cited and properly incorporated into a research paper. The World Wide Web, or Internet, has allowed the rapid spread of--and access to--both scholarly research material and the works of literature themselves (Those authors whose works are legally in the public domain and no longer protected by copyright laws—Edgar Allan Poe, for example-- can be readily found at many websites.). The demands for proper crediting of these materials is no less critical than for those accessed through conventional print media and is often more complicated. As with print sources, **electronic sources must be carefully identified** in order to be properly cited on the Works Cited page. In addition, they should be very carefully evaluated for credibility, as the Internet allows anyone to post information via personal or group web sites. Students need to be aware that convenience of access is no excuse for using poor-quality information in a research paper.

In general, current MLA guidelines for citing electronic sources on a Works Cited page call for inclusion of **all the information appropriate to any print version of a source** (if one exists), as well as certain information peculiar to the posting of Internet

information. The following are common examples of electronic sources. For further guidance and examples, you should consult the most recent version of the *MLA Style Manual*, often available in the library's reference section.

- **An essay from a Subscription Internet Database**

  Paulits, Walter J. "Ambivalence in 'Young Goodman Brown'." *American Literature* 41.4 (Jan. 1970): 577-584. Rpt. in *Short Story Criticism*. Ed. Anna J. Sheets. Vol. 29. Detroit: Gale Research, 1998. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 5 Sept. 2010.

- **An essay on the Web with prior Print Publication Data**

  Robinson, E. Arthur. "Thoreau and the Deathwatch in Poe's 'The Tell-Tale Heart'." *Poe Studies* 4.1 (June 1971): 14-16. *Poe Studies/Dark Romanticism*. Edgar Allan Poe Society of Baltimore. Web. 5 Sep. 2010.

- **An essay from a scholarly project**

  Grantz, David. "Stricken Eagle: Women in Poe." The Poe Decoder. Wed. 6 Sep. 2010.

- **A literary work in the Public Domain on the Web**

  Poe, Edgar Allan. "The Murders in the Rue Morgue." *Edgar Allan Poe: Tales, Sketches and Selected Criticism*. University of Virginia. Web. 5 Sep. 2010.

Incorporating Literary and Source Material into the Paper

Equally important as the proper creation of a Works Cited page is the proper incorporation of material from the work of literature and the scholarly sources uncovered through research. As previously indicated, the listings on the Works Cited page **must correspond to the sources named and cited in the body of the paper**, or serious confusion will result. And since the analytic research paper will necessarily involve textual evidence from the literary work, it too must be carefully cited and included on the Works Cited page.

In general, information from the literary work or a scholarly research source which has been **summarized** or **paraphrased** (which involves restating the material in **entirely**

your own words to avoid plagiarism**)** may be incorporated into your paper at any time by offering a parenthetical citation which names the source and the page on which the information was found. This source named in the citation must then correspond to a source listed alphabetically on the Works Cited page.

Using the earlier Hawthorne sample paragraph, the following would be an acceptable **summary** of the source material:

Theuse of the name 'Faith' for symbolic purposes by Hawthorne would perhaps have gone unnoticed by contemporary readers (Doe 54).

It's important to note that a **paraphrase** is generally of approximately the same length—and perhaps longer—than the original it is restating, and is used when clarity or the student's writing style might be sacrificed by using a direct quote. Thus, the following would be an appropriate paraphrase of the same original source material:

Hawthorne's use of the name 'Faith' is not as obvious a symbol as some critics have argued, because he was writing stories for an audience of the mid-nineteenth century, and not for critics who later analyzed his creations (Doe 54).

And here then is the same material from the hypothetical Doe source, as it was offered in the earlier sample paragraph, but as a **direct quotation**, with the source named in the text :

Critic John Doe suggests that the use of the name "Faith" is a bit obvious to some yet contends, "The name is perhaps not as heavy-handed a symbol on Hawthorne's part as some scholars have suggested, since he was obviously producing his tales for a broad popular audience of his day and not literature scholars of a later era" (54).

What should be seen here is that, with a direct quotation, proper incorporation of the quoted material involves what is known as an **introduction** or **attribution** for the quotation, just as would be seen for quotations offered in a newspaper or magazine article. The introductory phrase usually consists of the **name of the source** and an **appropriate verb** such as 'suggests,' 'points out,' 'writes,' 'contends,' or some such variation, followed by a comma and the source material (in quotation marks), and then

the page citation. Note that if the source is named in the introductory phrase (as in the above example), the parenthetical citation does not include the name again. If the source is **not** specifically named in the introduction, then the citation must include the source, as for the following anonymous introduction:

One Hawthorne scholar suggests, "Faith's pink ribbons are symbolic of her innocence, and when she loses them in the forest, she then is susceptible to the forces of evil" (Doe 55).

At times, a paper will need longer quotes for support than the brief example above. When the material to be quoted appears on **four lines or more** in the original source (and will require at least four or more lines in the paper), a different form is required from the previous examples. The quotation must be introduced by naming the source and offering a brief **sentence of synopsis**, followed by a colon. The quotation is then **indented ten letters or characters** from the left-hand margin and is **not** placed in quotation marks. It is followed by a period and the parenthetical citation, as in the following sample, which might appear along with the earlier Hawthorne discussion:

Themes offered for "Young Goodman Brown" are numerous, depending on the particular scholar's focus in the story. The ending of the tale, closely scrutinized by many scholars, appears to offer Hawthorne's best hint at his intended theme: Obsession with evil in the world prevents a person from seeing the good, and from being happy. Doe supports this view, countering those critics who overly emphasize the words put into the mouth of the devil:

The narrow focus on the part of some Hawthorne analysts, choosing to see Hawthorne's thematic opinion in the words of the devil ("Evil is the communion of your race"), results from paying attention to an idea very deliberately repeated by a central figure in the story. Yet Hawthorne does not end the story with the devil's pronouncements, and the reader must take into account the somber conclusion: a life in which Brown sees evil wherever he looks, even in wife Faith. (56)

The approach to the literary analysis research paper offered here is intended as a helpful, if necessarily incomplete, guide for students. Further questions should be addressed to the professor. And it's important to remember that individual professors may take very different approaches to their research paper assignments than the one outlined here.

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