Tips for Writing a Literary Analysis

When writing a literary analysis, it is important to make sure that you limit the amount of summarizing that you do. In order to keep from summarizing, remember the following tips and descriptions.

Summary versus Analysis

Summary – A summary is a brief overview. There are different types of summaries that require different approaches, but predominantly summaries follow these guidelines:

- Mention only the most important aspects of the plot
- Omit insubstantial details
- Quotation marks or citations are not necessary (it is assumed that the summary is based on someone else's words)
- Write in present tense
- Be brief (a summary is meant to be much shorter than the original text – it is not a paraphrase)

There are several purposes for a summary. Sometimes a writer is expected to include a summary in an analysis. In this case, the summary is used to introduce the audience to the text that is being analyzed. This generally occurs within the introduction of the analysis in order to remind or inform the reader of the events of the text prior to analysis.

Sample Summary:

Little Red Riding Hood is the story of a young girl and her sick grandmother who are tricked by a wolf. The wolf hides in the grandmother's bed and tricks Little Red Riding Hood into coming into her grandmother's sick room. Little Red Riding Hood and her grandmother are both swallowed by the wolf, but they are saved by a hunter who cuts open the wolf's stomach, pulls them out, and fills the wolf's stomach with rocks. This experience teaches Little Red Riding Hood a very valuable lesson.

Analysis – An analysis is a detailed examination of specific elements within a text or other work (i.e., movie, article, advertisement). In an analysis, the writer breaks down aspects of the text and examines them for purpose, effect, or meaning. Below are some characteristics of an analysis that differentiate it from a summary.

- Aspects of the plot are not analyzed in chronological order (unless there is a reason for doing so)
- Elements of the text are discussed in detail
- There is a specific reason for choosing a detail from the text to analyze

Elements of the text:

- Theme – the central idea of the text
    - A writer might argue that the theme of *Othello* is jealousy.
- Symbolism – a symbol is an object that represents something other than the original object.
    - Examples of common symbols are a cross which might represent Christianity, the serpent which might represent evil, a rose which might represent beauty, a lily which might represent purity, and a dove which might represent peace. Colors alone can also work as symbols. For example, white might represent purity, and purple might represent royalty.
- Allegory – an allegory is a text which can be read with more than one level of meaning (a primary or surface-level meaning and a deeper or secondary meaning).
    - A writer might argue that *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* is a religious allegory in which Aslan is Jesus and Edmund is the sinner. One example of Aslan as Jesus is the sacrifice of his life for Edmund's. Aslan's return to life can be interpreted as Jesus' resurrection, and Edmund's sin, indulging in gluttony by eating the Turkish Delight and later becoming obsessed with it, is representative of mankind's sin, which can be compared to the original sin of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.

- Characters - Characters within the text may be analyzed in many ways
    - Archetypal characters can usually be classified by type because they behave or speak in a way that is typical and expected. For instance the hero is an archetypal character, who often attempts a journey or quest and demonstrates characteristics or qualities that are valued by the culture in which he or she lives. Odysseus, King Arthur, and Frodo Baggins are examples of archetypal heroes. A less obvious archetypal character is the witch, who may appear as a hag or as a beauty and who tries to trap, delay, or destroy the protagonist (the hero). The evil step-mother in a fairy tale is an example of an archetypal witch. Other archetypal characters include the villain, the whore, the virgin, the martyr, the siren, the traitor, and the rebel. Archetypes can also be found in other elements of the text such as the quest, the journey to the underworld, birth, life, and death.
    - Characters can also be compared and contrasted, and their actions within a text can be analyzed even if they do not seem to fit within a prescribed archetype.

Additional tips:

- When using sources, remember that most of what is said in the paper should be your own ideas, not your source's. Quotes from sources are used as evidence to support your own ideas.
- Keep your goals in mind. These may change as you progress through your essay, but you want to be sure to stay on topic.
- Remember that most writing requires steps toward the final version (i.e., brainstorming, researching, drafting). Don't expect to complete all of these sequences the day before (or the same day) the essay is due.
- It is almost impossible to analyze a text that you haven't finished reading.