



9 Interpretive Analyses and Writing about Literature

Interpretation is one of the key tasks of educated people. As the phrase “That’s open to interpretation” suggests, searching for meaning does not involve looking for a single right answer. Instead, it involves figuring out a way of understanding that is meaningful to the writer and convincing to readers.

9a Understand the assignment.

In college, you will frequently get assignments that require you to explore the meaning of written documents, literary works, cultural artifacts, social situations, and natural events. When an assignment asks you to compare, explain, analyze, discuss, or do a reading of something, you are expected to study that subject closely to figure out what it might mean.

Interpretive analyses, including comparative papers, encourage you to move beyond simple description. They call on you to examine or compare particular items for a reason: to enhance your reader’s understanding of people’s conditions, actions, beliefs, or desires.

9b Approach writing an interpretive analysis as a process.

Writing an interpretive analysis typically begins with critical reading. (See *Chapter 7: Reading, Thinking, Writing: The Critical Connection for a discussion of how to read texts and visuals critically.*)

1. Discovering an aspect of the subject that is meaningful to you

Although you will not include your personal motives in the finished version of your interpretive analysis, your interpretation will be more compelling if you take time to discover why the subject is meaningful to you. Think about your own experience while you read, listen, or observe. Connecting your own thoughts and experience to what you are studying can help you develop fresh interpretations.

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WRITING beyond COLLEGE

Interpretive Analyses

You can find interpretive analyses in professional journals like *PMLA* (*Publications of the Modern Language Association*) as well as popular publications like the *New Yorker* and the *Atlantic Monthly*. Take a look at some of these publications to see how your work connects with that of professional scholars and critics.

- A cultural critic contrasts the way AIDS and cancer are talked about, imagined, and therefore treated.
- Two geologists analyze photos of an arctic coastal plain taken from an airplane and infer that the effects of seismic activity vary according to the type of vegetation in the area.
- A musicologist compares the revised endings of two pieces by Beethoven to figure out what makes a work complete and finished.
- A philosopher reflects on personal identity as a complex and shifting concept by investigating how the ideas of the philosophers Descartes and Hume are alike and different.
- A cultural critic explores Freud's anecdotes, showing how they are used both to control and to dramatize the uncanny.

2. Developing a thoughtful stance

In an interpretive analysis you take your readers with you on an intellectual journey. You are saying, in effect, "Come, think this through with me." Consequently, your stance should be thoughtful, inquisitive, and open-minded. You are exploring the possible meaning of something. Usually it is wise to admit uncertainty and qualify your interpretations with words like *probably*, *may*, and *perhaps*. Read your writing aloud, and as you listen to your words, ask yourself whether your stance sounds as exploratory as it should.

3. Using an intellectual framework

To interpret your subject effectively, you will have to analyze it using a relevant perspective or intellectual framework. For example, the basic elements of a work of fiction, such as plot, character, and setting, are often used to analyze stories. Sigmund Freud's theory of conscious and unconscious forces in conflict has been applied to various things, including people, poems, and historical periods. In his analysis of Flannery O'Connor's story "Everything That Rises Must Converge," Rajeev Bector uses sociologist Erving Goffman's ideas about "character con-

tests” to interpret the conflict between a son and his mother. (*Bector’s analysis begins on p. 195.*)

No matter what framework you use, analysis often entails taking something apart and then putting it back together by figuring out how the parts make up a cohesive whole. Because the goal of analysis is to create a meaningful interpretation, the writer needs to treat the whole as more than the sum of its parts and recognize that determining meaning is a complex problem with multiple solutions.

4. Listing, comparing, questioning, and classifying to discover your thesis

To figure out a thesis, it is often useful to explore separate aspects of your subject. For example, if you are analyzing literature, you might consider the plot, the characters, the setting, and the tone before deciding to focus your thesis on how a character’s personality drives the plot to its conclusion. If you are comparing two subjects, you would look for and list points of likeness and difference. Note that comparing is not just a way of presenting ideas; it is also a way of discovering ideas. What features do the items have—and not have—in common? Can you find subtle differences in aspects that at first seem alike? Subtle similarities in aspects that at first seem very different? Which do you find more interesting, the similarities or the differences? The answers to these questions might help you figure out your thesis.

As you work on discovering your thesis, try one or more of the following strategies:

- Take notes about what you see or read, and if it helps, write a summary. Look for interesting issues that emerge as you work on your summary and notes.
- Ask yourself questions about the subject you are analyzing, and write down any interesting answers. Imagine what kinds of questions your professor might ask about the artifact, document, performance, or event you are considering. In answering these questions, try to figure out the thesis you will present and support.
- Name the class of things to which the item you are analyzing belongs (for example, memoirs). Then identify important parts or aspects of that class (for example, scene, point of view, turning points).

5. Making your thesis focused and purposeful

Because the subject of an interpretative analysis is usually complex, you cannot possibly write about all of its dimensions. Instead, focus your paper on one or two issues or questions that are key to understanding the subject. The goal of an interpretive analysis is to make

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[Thesis/Central Idea](#)

a point about your subject. Focusing can help you resist the temptation to describe everything you see.

FOCUSED THESIS

In O'Connor's short story, plot, setting, and characterization work together to reinforce the impression that racism is a complex and pervasive problem.

FOCUSED THESIS

In the first section of Shubert's *Der Atlas*, both the tempo and the harmonic progression express the sorrow of the hero's eternal plight.

Although you want your point to be clear, you also want to make sure that your thesis anticipates the "So what?" question and sets up an interesting context for your interpretation. Unless you relate your specific thesis to some more general issue, idea, or problem, your interpretive analysis may seem pointless to readers. (*For more on developing your thesis, see Chapter 3: Planning and Shaping the Whole Essay, pp. 45–47.*)

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6. Introducing the general issue, a clear thesis or question, and relevant context

In interpretive analyses, it often takes more than one paragraph to do what an introduction needs to do:

- Identify the general issue, concept, or problem at stake. You can also present the intellectual framework that you are applying.
- Provide relevant background information.
- Name the specific item or items you will focus on in your analysis (or the items you will compare).
- State the thesis you will support and develop or the main question(s) your analysis will answer.

You need not do these things in the order listed. Sometimes it is a good idea to introduce the specific focus of your analysis before presenting either the issue or the background information. Just make sure that your introduction does the four things it needs to do, even though you may begin it with a provocative statement or a revealing example designed to capture your readers' attention. (*For more on introductions, see Chapter 4: Drafting Paragraphs and Visuals, p. 85.*)

For example, the following is the introductory paragraph from a paper on the development of Margaret Sanger's and Gloria Steinem's feminism that was written for a history class:

In our male-dominated society, almost every woman has experienced some form of oppression. Being oppressed is like having one end of a rope fastened to a pole and the other end fastened to one's belt: it tends to hold a woman back. But a few tenacious and visionary women have fought oppression and have consequently made the lives of others easier. Two of these visionary women are Margaret Sanger and Gloria Steinem. As their autobiographical texts show, Sanger and Steinem felt compassion for women close to them, and that compassion not only shaped their lives but also empowered them to fight for changes in society.

In one relatively short paragraph, the student identifies her paper's general issue (the feminist struggle against oppression), introduces the items to be compared (two autobiographical texts), and in the last sentence, states her main point or thesis. Although she has made a good beginning, her readers need additional background information about Sanger and Steinem—information that will give them a context for the two texts that are being compared. Therefore, the student must expand on the introduction a bit more before moving on to the points she wants to make to support her thesis.

7. Planning your paper so that each point supports your thesis

As with any paper, an interpretive analysis has three main parts: an introduction, a body, and a conclusion. After you pose a key question or state your thesis in the introduction, you need to work point by point, organizing the points to answer the question and support your interpretive thesis. From beginning to end, readers must be able to follow the train of thought in your interpretive analysis and see how each point you make is related to your thesis. (*For more on developing your ideas, see Chapter 3: Planning and Shaping the Whole Essay, pp. 35–45.*)

9c Write interpretive papers in the humanities.

Writers in the humanities analyze literature, art, film, theater, music, history, and philosophy. In Part 1, we followed a student's analysis of a photograph through several drafts. In this chapter we look at some examples of literary analysis. The following ideas and practices are useful in writing interpretive papers in the humanities:

- **Base your analysis on the work itself.** Works of art affect each of us differently, and any interpretation has a subjective element. Also, every film, musical composition, or other work is open to multiple interpretations because there are numerous critical theories about the significance of art. However,

LEARNING in COLLEGE

Interpreting in the Visual Arts

Interpreting a painting is similar to interpreting a literary work or any other work of art. For example, your interpretation of this 1965 painting by Andy Warhol, titled *Campbell's Soup Can (Tomato)* would likely reflect your personal reaction to the work as well as what you know about the artist and his times, but it would have to be grounded in a discussion of details of the work itself. What is the subject of the painting? How

has the artist rendered it? How closely does it resemble an actual soup can? Warhol was part of a movement called Pop Art (*Pop* being short for *popular*). What does the painting suggest about the relationship between fine art and popular culture?



the possibility of different interpretations does not mean that all interpretations are equally valid. Your reading of the work needs to be grounded in details from the work itself.

- **Consider how the concepts you are learning in your course apply to the work you are analyzing.** If your course focuses on the formal elements of art, for example, you might look at how those elements function in the painting

you have chosen to analyze. If your course focuses on the social context of a work, you might look at how the work shares or subverts the belief system and worldview that was common in its time.

- **Use the present tense when writing about the work and the past tense when writing about its history.** Use the present tense to talk about the events that happen within a work: *In Aristophanes’s plays, characters frequently **step** out of the scene and **address** the audience directly.* Use the present tense as well to discuss decisions made by the work’s creator: *In his version of the Annunciation, Leonardo **places** the Virgin outside, in an Italian garden.* Use the past tense, however, to relate historical information about the work or creator: *Kant **wrote** about science, history, criminal justice, and politics as well as philosophical ideas.*

9d Write a literary interpretation of a poem.

The poet Edwin Arlington Robinson defined poetry as “a language that tells us, through a more or less emotional reaction, something that cannot be said.” Although literary analysis can never tell us exactly what a poem is saying, it can help us think about it more deeply.

The process of writing an interpretive paper about a poem begins, of course, with reading. First read the complete poem without stopping, and then note your initial thoughts and feelings. What is your first sense of the subject of the poem? What ideas does the poem suggest? What images does it create?

Reread the poem several times, paying close attention to the rhythms of the lines (reading aloud helps) and the poet’s choice of words. Look up any unusual words in the dictionary, using the *Oxford English Dictionary* when you are analyzing a poem written in an earlier time. Think about how the poem develops. Do the last lines represent a shift from or fulfillment of the poem’s opening? Look for connections among the poem’s details, and think about their significance. The questions in the box on page 190 may help guide your analysis.

Use the insights you gain from your close reading to develop a working thesis about the poem. In the student essay that follows, McKenna Doherty develops a thesis about the poem “Testimonial,” reprinted on page 191. Doherty’s analysis is based on her knowledge of other poems by Rita Dove and her attempt to discover the theme of this particular work. She focuses on how four poetic devices give the theme its emotional impact.

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QUESTIONS for ANALYZING POETRY

Speaker and Tone

How would you describe the speaker's voice? Is it that of a parent or a lover, an adult or a child, a man or a woman? What is the speaker's tone—is it stern or playful, melancholy or elated, nostalgic or hopeful?

Connotations

Along with their dictionary meanings, words have connotations—associative meanings. Although both *trudge* and *saunter* mean “walk slowly,” their connotations are very different. What feelings or ideas do individual words in the poem connote?

Imagery

Does the poem conjure images that appeal to any of your senses—for example, the shocking feeling of a cold cloth on feverish skin or the sharp smell of a gas station? How do the images shape the mood of the poem? What ideas do they suggest?

Figurative Language

An in-depth study of poetry will acquaint you with the many types of figurative language used by poets, but the two most common are simile and metaphor. Does the poem use **simile** to directly compare two things using *like* or *as* (*his heart is sealed tight like a freezer door*)? Does it use **metaphor** to implicitly link one thing to another (*his ice-hard heart*)? How does the comparison enhance meaning?

Sound, Rhythm, and Meter

What vowel and consonant sounds recur through the poem? Do the lines of the poem resemble the rhythms of ordinary speech, or do they have a more musical quality? Consider how the sounds of the poem create an effect, just as musical notes do.

Structure

Notice how the poem is organized into parts or stanzas, considering spacing, punctuation, capitalization, and rhyme schemes. How do the parts relate to one another?

Theme

What is the subject of the poem? What does the poet's choice of language and imagery suggest about his or her attitude toward that subject?

Testimonial

Rita Dove

Back when the earth was new
and heaven just a whisper,
back when the names of things
hadn't had time to stick;

back when the smallest breezes
melted summer into autumn,
when all the poplars quivered
sweetly in rank and file . . .

the world called, and I answered.
Each glance ignited to a gaze.
I caught my breath and called that life,
swooned between spoonfuls of lemon sorbet.

I was pirouette and flourish,
I was filigree and flame.
How could I count my blessings
when I didn't know their names?

Back when everything was still to come,
luck leaked out everywhere.
I gave my promise to the world,
and the world followed me here.

Sample student analysis of a poem

Rita Dove's "Testimonial": The Music of Childhood

Rita Dove rarely uses obvious, rigid rhyme schemes or strict metrical patterns in her poetry, and her subtle use of language often obscures both the subject and themes of her poetry. However, careful analysis of her work is rewarding, as Dove's poems are dense with ideas and figurative language. Her poem "Testimonial" is a good example of this complexity. Although the poem seems ambiguous on first reading, repeated readings reveal many common and cleverly used poetic techniques that are employed to express a common literary theme: the difference between adult knowledge and childhood innocence.

The first two lines refer to a time when “the earth was new / and heaven just a whisper.” At first, these lines appear to refer to the Biblical origins of earth and heaven; however, the title of the poem invites us to take the poem as a personal account of the speaker’s experience.

The time when “the earth was new” could refer to the speaker’s youth. Youth is also the time of life when heaven is “just a whisper,” since matters of death and religion are not present in a child’s awareness. Thus, Dove’s opening lines actually put the reader in the clear, familiar context of childhood.

The lines that follow support this idea. Dove describes the time period of the poem as “when the names of things / hadn’t had time to stick” (lines 3-4). Children often forget the names of things and are constantly asking their parents, “What is this? What is that?” The names of objects do not “stick” in their minds. The second stanza, describing a scene of trees and breezes, seems childlike in its sensitivity to nature, particularly to the change of seasons. The trees swaying “sweetly in rank and file” (8) suggest an innocent, simplistic worldview, in which everything, even the random movement of trees in the wind, occurs in an orderly, nonthreatening fashion.

Notice that Dove does not state “when I was a child” at the beginning of the poem. Instead, she uses poetic language—alliteration, rhyme, uncommon words, and personification—to evoke the experience of childhood. Figurative language may make the poem more difficult to understand on first reading, but it ultimately makes the poem more personally meaningful.

In line 12, “swooned between spoonfuls of lemon sorbet” not only evokes the experience of childhood, a time when ice cream might literally make one swoon, but the alliteration of “swooned,” “spoonfuls,” and “sorbet” also makes the poem musical. Dove also uses alliteration in lines 14, 15, and 18. This conventional poetic technique is used relatively briefly and not regularly. The alliteration does not call attention to itself—the music is quiet.

Examples provided to illustrate theme.

More examples given and interpreted.

Writer presents four poetic techniques, which she explains in the following paragraphs.

“Testimonial” also uses the best known poetic technique: rhyme. Rhyme is used in many poems—what is unusual about its use in this poem is that, as with alliteration, rhyme appears irregularly. Only a few lines end with rhyming words, and the rhymes are more suggestive than exact: “whisper” and “stick” (2, 4), “gaze” and “sorbet” (10, 12), “flame” and “names” (14, 16), and “everywhere” and “here” (18, 20). These rhymes, or consonances, stand out because they are isolated and contrast with the other, unrhymed, lines.

Dove occasionally uses words that children would probably not know, such as “swooned” (12), “sorbet” (12), “pirouette” (13), “flourish” (13), and “filigree” (14). These words suggest the central theme, which is underscored in the final question of the stanza when the narrator of the poem asks, “How could I count my blessings / when I didn’t know their names?” The adult words emphasize the contrast between the speaker’s past innocence and present knowledge.

The poem ends with the mysterious lines, “I gave my promise to the world / and the world followed me here” (19-20). The world is personified, given the characteristics of a man or woman capable of accepting a promise and following the speaker. As with the opening lines, these final lines are confusing if they are taken literally, but the lines become clearer when one considers the perspective of the speaker. It is as if the speaker has taken a journey from childhood to adulthood. Just as the speaker has changed during the course of this journey, so too has the world changed. The childhood impressions of the world that make up the poem—the sorbet, the trees swaying in the breeze—do not last into adulthood. The speaker becomes a different person, an adult, and the world also becomes something else. It has “followed” the speaker into adulthood; it has not remained static and unchanging.

In “Testimonial,” Dove presents a vision of childhood so beautifully, so musically, that we can experience it with her, if only for the space of a few lines.

Analysis of poem concluded with interpretation of entire poem.

Paper concluded briefly, neatly.

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Work Cited

Dove, Rita. "Testimonial." *Literature: Approaches to Fiction, Poetry, and Drama*. Ed. Robert DiYanni. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2004. 738. Print.

Works-Cited list follows MLA style and begins on a new page.

9e Write a literary interpretation of a work of fiction.

When we read a short story or novel, we are often so engaged by the plot that we may overlook the other literary elements that contribute to the work's meaning. A literary analysis paper is an opportunity to look more deeply into the work and develop a better understanding of it. With a short story, you may want to read it through once for the plot, the emotional effect, and the theme, and then reread it closely several times. The questions in the box on this and the next page may help guide your analysis.

The field of literary criticism offers various perspectives on and strategies for analyzing fiction. In your studies you may learn about formalistic theories, reader response theory, and postmodern theories, for example. However, it is also possible to apply the insights offered by other disciplines to your literary analysis paper. In the essay that begins on the next page, Rajeev Bector, a sociology major, applies a theory that he learned in a sociology course to his analysis of a short story.

QUESTIONS for ANALYZING FICTION

Characters

The characters are the people who inhabit the fictional world of the story. What are the relationships among the characters? What do the characters' thoughts, actions, and speech reveal about them? What changes take place among or within the characters?

Point of View

Is the story told by a character speaking as "I" (first-person point of view)? Is the story, instead, told by a third-person narrator, who lets the reader know what one or all (or none) of the characters are thinking? How does point of view affect your understanding of what happens in the story?

QUESTIONS for ANALYZING FICTION *(continued)*

Plot

The plot is the arrangement of episodes in a story. What do these particular episodes in the characters' lives reveal? What did you think and feel at different points in the story? What kinds of changes take place over the course of the story?

Setting

Setting is the time and place of the action—for example, the setting of *The Scarlet Letter* is the Massachusetts Bay Colony of the mid-1600s. Within that setting are symbolically charged contrasting locations—the forest and the marketplace. What is the significance of the story's setting? What associations does the writer make with each location? How does the social context of the setting affect the characters' choices and attitudes?

Language

Fiction writers, like poets, use figurative language and imagery to meaningful effect (see the box “Questions for Analyzing Poetry” on p. 190). Are there patterns of imagery and metaphor in the story? What significance can you infer from these patterns?

Theme

What sense of the story's significance can you infer from the elements above? Are there any passages in the work that seem to address the theme directly?

Sample student analysis of a short story

The Character Contest in Flannery O'Connor's

“Everything That Rises Must Converge”

Sociologist Erving Goffman believes that every social interaction establishes our identity and preserves our image, honor, and credibility in the hearts and minds of others. Social interactions, he says, are in essence “character contests” that occur not only in games and sports but also in our everyday dealings with strangers, peers, friends, and even family members. Goffman defines character contests as “disputes [that]

Key idea
that provides intellectual
framework.

are sought out and indulged in (often with glee) as a means of establishing where one's boundaries are" (29). Just such a contest occurs in Flannery O'Connor's short story "Everything That Rises Must Converge."

As they travel from home to the Y, Julian and his mother, Mrs. Chestny, engage in a character contest, a dispute we must understand in order to figure out the story's theme. Julian is so frustrated with his mother that he virtually "declare[s] war on her," "allow[s] no glimmer of sympathy to show on his face," and "imagine[s] various unlikely ways by which he could teach her a lesson" (O'Connor 185, 186). But why would Julian want to hurt his mother, a woman who is already suffering from high blood pressure?

Question posed.

Julian's conflict with Mrs. Chestny results from pent-up hostility and tension. As Goffman explains, character contests are a way of living that often leaves a "residue": "Every day in many ways we can try to score points and every day we can be shot down" (29). For many years, Julian has had to live under his racist mother's authority, and every time he protested her racist views he was probably shot down because of his "radical ideas" and "lack of practical experience" (O'Connor 184). As a result, a residue of defeat and shame has accumulated that fuels a fire of rebellion against his mother. But even though Julian rebels against his mother's racist views, it does not mean that he is not a racist himself. Julian does not realize that in his own way, he is as prejudiced as his mother. He makes it "a point" to sit next to blacks, in contrast to his mother, who purposely sits next to whites (182). They are two extremes, each biased, for if Julian were truly fair to all, he would not care whom he sat next to.

Interpretation organized by point: first point.

When we look at the situation from Mrs. Chestny's viewpoint, we realize that she must maintain her values and beliefs for two important reasons: to uphold her character as Julian's mother and to act out her prescribed role in society. Even if she finds Julian's arguments on race relations and integration valid and plausible, Mrs. Chestny must still refute them. If she did not, she would lose face as Julian's mother—that image of herself as the one with authority. By preserving her self-image,

"We" indicates thoughtful stance, not Bector's personal feelings.

Mrs. Chestny shows that she has what Goffman sees as key to “character”: some quality that seems “essential and unchanging” (28).

Second point.

Besides upholding her character as Julian’s mother, Mrs. Chestny wants to preserve the honor and dignity of her family tradition. Like an actor performing before an audience, she must play the role prescribed for her—the role of a white supremacist. But her situation is hopeless, for the role she must play fails to acknowledge the racial realities that have transformed her world. According to Goffman, when a “situation” is “hopeless,” a character “can gamely give everything . . . and then go down bravely, or proudly, or insolently, or gracefully or with an ironic smile on his lips” (32). For Mrs. Chestny, being game means trying to preserve her honor and dignity as she goes down to physical defeat in the face of hopeless odds.

Third point.

Given the differences between Mrs. Chestny’s and her son’s values, as well as the oppressiveness of Mrs. Chestny’s racist views, we can understand why Julian struggles to “teach” his mother “a lesson” (185) throughout the entire bus ride. Goffman would point out that “each individual is engaged in providing evidence to establish a definition of himself at the expense of what can remain for the other” (29). But in the end, neither character wins the contest. Julian’s mother loses her sense of self when she is pushed to the ground by a “colored woman” wearing a hat identical to hers (187). Faced with his mother’s breakdown, Julian feels his own identity being overwhelmed by “the world of guilt and sorrow” (191).

Thesis.

Conclusion: main point about Julian and his mother related to larger issue of racism.

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Works Cited

- Goffman, Erving. “Character Contests.” *Text Book: An Introduction to Literary Language*. Ed. Robert Scholes, Nancy Comley, and Gregory Ulmer. New York: St. Martin’s, 1988. 27–33. Print.
- O’Connor, Flannery. “Everything That Rises Must Converge.” *Fiction*. Ed. R. S. Gwynn. 2nd ed. New York: Addison, 1998. 179–91. Print.

Works-Cited list follows MLA style and begins on a new page.

9f Write a literary interpretation of a play.

Every production of a play is an interpretation of that play, a series of decisions on how to bring the words on the page to life in a meaningful way. Similarly, when we interpret a play, we need to imagine the world of the play—the setting and costumes, the delivery of lines of dialogue, and the movement of characters in relation to one another. As our understanding of a play deepens through analysis, we are better able to imagine the action. This means that a play, too, is best read more than once.

Drama shares many elements with poetry and fiction. Like poetry, it is meant to be spoken, and the sound and rhythm of its lines are significant. Like fiction, it is a story that unfolds through characters acting in a plot. As in both genres, imagery and figurative language work to convey emotions and meaning. In addition to reviewing the questions for analyzing poetry and fiction (*see pp. 190 and 194*), you may find it helpful to consider the questions in the box below when analyzing a play.

In the following paper, Sam Chodoff analyzes the theme of honor as it applies to the characters in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, using dialogue to support his interpretation.

QUESTIONS for ANALYZING DRAMA

Dialogue

What does the dialogue reveal about the characters' thoughts and motivations? How do the characters' words incite other characters to action?

Stage Directions

Do the stage directions include references to any objects that may serve as dramatic symbols? How might costume directions suggest mood or symbolize such concepts as freedom, repression, or chivalry, for example? Do the directions call for any music or sounds to add to the atmosphere of the work? How do directions about gestures and movements affect your interpretation of the dialogue?

Sample student analysis of a play

Honor in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

In the world of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, actions, not motives, are the measure of a character's honor. Good actions bestow honor; evil actions withdraw it. Not all characters in the play, however, are equally equipped to know one from the other. The main characters receive divine enlightenment about what is right and wrong, but the minor characters have to rely on luck, making choices without divine assistance.

Key term—
"honor"—
defined.

Characters fall into one of three categories of honor determined by where their actions fall on the spectrum between good and evil. Hamlet and Fortinbras represent extreme good; Claudius represents extreme evil. These characters have been enlightened by heaven and their actions are based on this divinely granted knowledge. In the middle of the spectrum are all the other characters, who have chosen a path based on their own, not divine, knowledge, and for whom honor is a matter of luck.

As Hamlet storms into the palace in anger, seeking revenge for the death of his father, Claudius reassures Gertrude, telling her, "Do not fear our person. / There's such divinity doth hedge a king / That treason can but peep to what it would, / Acts little of his will" (4.5.122-25). Claudius knows that by killing his brother and usurping his throne, he has forfeited any chance to be the rightful king, and behind his façade, he struggles with his own guilt, knowing that heaven will remain closed to him while he still holds the "effects for which [he] did the murder" (3.3.54). Meanwhile, unbeknownst to Claudius, heaven has, through the ghost of Hamlet's father, commanded Hamlet to avenge his father's murder and restore a rightful king to the throne, as shown in fig. 1. This reveals that Claudius is on the lowest end of the honor spectrum, that his honor is false, a mere pretense of honor with nothing but evil underneath. His actions show that an honorable life remains unattainable when the appearance of honor is the only goal, and that, in Hamlet's words, "one may smile, and smile, and be a villain" (1.5.108).

Points
illustrated
with quotations
from
the play.

First of three
examples to
illustrate the
categories of
honor.

Illustration
of a scene
discussed in
the paper.



Fig. 1. Hamlet confronted by his father's ghost as his mother looks on amazed, engraving from John and Josiah Boydell, *Boydell's Shakespeare Prints* (Mineola: Dover, 2004) 73. Print.

Hamlet and Fortinbras, on the other hand, have been shown by heaven the conflict that they must resolve and are left to do that task without any further divine aid. With a clear duty whose virtue is unquestionable, their honor is assured as long as they pursue and complete their objective. The last scene shows that they have achieved this goal, as Fortinbras gives orders to pay tribute to Hamlet: "Let

Second
example
given.

four captains / Bear Hamlet like a soldier to the stage, / . . . and for his passage / The soldier's music and the rite of war / Speak loudly for him" (5.2.400-01, 403-05). While the bodies of the other characters are ignored, Hamlet's is treated with ceremony. This disparity in how the characters are treated confirms that Hamlet and Fortinbras have been placed at the highest end of the honor spectrum, and it shows that the many grave mistakes they both have made (resulting in the death of many innocent people) will be forgiven because the mistakes were made in pursuit of a divine objective. This idea of honor was acceptable in Shakespeare's day, as illustrated in a treatise by Sir William Segar in 1590: "God . . . would give victory to him that justly adventured his life for truth, honor, and justice. . . . the trial by Arms is not only natural, but also necessary and allowable" (qtd. in Corum 153).

Other characters in *Hamlet* are not privy to the true nature of the world and are forced to make decisions without heaven's help. The level of honor these characters attain is determined by luck; with their limited knowledge of good and evil, right and wrong, these characters often act dishonorably. When Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are summoned before the king and asked to spy on Hamlet, they respond positively, saying, "[W]e both obey, / And here give up ourselves in the full bent / To lay our service freely at your feet / To be commanded" (2.2.29-32). In their ignorance, they accept Claudius as the rightful king and thus unintentionally align themselves with the evil he represents, losing any honor they might have gained. Other characters are similarly tricked into obeying Claudius.

Luck can go both ways, however, and several characters end up well, even in the absence of a divine messenger. For example, Horatio chooses from the very beginning to follow Hamlet and not only survives but also attains honor. His honor, though, is by no means assured; there are many instances in which he could have acted differently. He could quite easily have gone to Claudius with the news of the ghost, an act which, while perfectly natural, would have left him devoid of honor.

Third example given.

Another example given of the third category of honor, to strengthen claim.

We would like to think that, by adhering to virtues, we can control how we will be judged. In *Hamlet*, we are shown a world in which lives are spent in the struggle between good and evil, often without clear guidance. But those who have lived honorably are rewarded with a place in heaven, the “undiscover’d country” (3.1.79) that every character both fears and desires. Only those characters either chosen by heaven to be honorable or who by luck become honorable reach paradise, while others burn in hell or wait in purgatory (Greenblatt 51). Very few people in Hamlet’s world will be granted a place in heaven.

Essay concluded concisely.

Works-Cited list follows MLA style and begins a new page.

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9g Write case studies and other interpretive papers in the social sciences.

Social scientists are trained observers and recorders of the behavior of individuals and groups in specific situations and institutions. They use writing not only to see clearly and remember precisely what they observe but also to interpret its meaning, as in this passage from a textbook by anthropologist Conrad Kottak.

Rituals at McDonald’s (excerpt)

CONRAD KOTTAK

Each day, on the average, a new McDonald’s restaurant opens somewhere in the world. The number of McDonald’s outlets today far surpasses the total number of all fast-food restaurants in the United States in 1945. McDonald’s has grown from a single hamburger stand in San

Bernardino, California, into today's international web of thousands of outlets. Have factors less obvious to American natives than relatively low cost, fast service, and taste contributed to McDonald's success? Could it be that natives—in consuming the products and propaganda of McDonald's—are not just eating but experiencing something comparable in certain respects to participation in religious rituals? To answer this question, we must briefly review the nature of ritual.

[Religious] [r]ituals . . . are formal—stylized, repetitive, and stereotyped. They are performed in special places at set times. Rituals include liturgical orders—set sequences of words and actions laid down by someone other than the current performers. Rituals also convey information about participants and their cultural traditions. Performed year after year, generation after generation, rituals translate messages, values, and sentiments into action. Rituals are social acts. Inevitably, some participants are more strongly committed than others are to the beliefs on which the rituals are founded. However, just by taking part in a joint public act, people signal that they accept an order that transcends their status as mere individuals.

For many years, like millions of other Americans, I have occasionally eaten at McDonald's. Eventually I began to notice certain ritual-like aspects of Americans' behavior at these fast-food restaurants. Tell your fellow Americans that going to McDonald's is similar in some ways to going to church, and their bias as natives will reveal itself in laughter, denials, or questions about your sanity. Just as football is a game and *Star Trek* is "entertainment," McDonald's, for natives, is just a place to eat. However, an analysis of what natives do at McDonald's will reveal a very high degree of formal, uniform behavior by staff members and customers alike. It is particularly interesting that this invariance in word and deed has developed without any theological doctrine. McDonald's ritual aspect is founded on 20th-century technology, particularly automobiles, television, work away from home, and the short lunch break. It is striking, nevertheless, that one commercial organization should be so much more successful than other businesses, the schools, the military, and even many religions in producing behavioral invariance. Factors other than low cost, fast service, and the taste of the food—all of which are approximated by other chains—have contributed to our acceptance of McDonald's and adherence to its rules. . . .

In this passage, Kottak based many of his conclusions on his observations of the way people behave at McDonald's restaurants. When social scientists conduct a systematic study of people's behavior in groups or institutions, they report on and interpret their observations in **case studies**. Anthropologists, for example, often spend extended periods living among and observing the people of one society or group

and then report on their findings in a kind of case study called an *ethnography*.

Accurate observations are essential starting points for a case study, and writing helps researchers make clear and precise observations. Here are some things to consider as you undertake a case study assignment.

1. Choosing a topic that raises a question

In doing a case study, your purpose is to connect what you see and hear with issues and concepts in the social sciences. Choose a topic and turn it into a research question. Before engaging in your field research, write down your hypothesis—a tentative answer to your research question—as well as some categories of behavior or other things to look for.

2. Collecting data

Make a detailed and accurate record of what you observe and when and how you observed it. Whenever you can, count or measure, and take down word for word what is said. Use frequency counts—the number of occurrences of specific, narrowly defined instances of behavior. If you are observing a classroom, for example, you might count the number of teacher-directed questions asked by several children. If you are observing group counseling sessions for female parolees, you might count the number of women who attend. Your research methodologies course will introduce you to many ways to quantify data. Graphs like Figure 9.1 can help you display and summarize frequency data.

3. Assuming an unbiased stance

In case study, you are presenting empirical findings, based on careful observation. Your stance is that of an unbiased observer.

4. Discovering meaning in your data

Your case study is based on the notes you make during your observations. As you review this material, try to uncover connections, identify inconsistencies, and draw inferences. For example, ask yourself why a subject behaved in a specific way, and consider different explanations for the behavior. You will also need to draw upon the techniques for quantitative analysis that you learn in a statistics course.

5. Presenting your findings in an organized way

There are two basic ways to present your findings in the body of a case study. (1) **As stages of a process:** A student studying gang initiation organized her observations chronologically into appropriate stages. If you organize your study this way, be sure to transform the minute-by-minute history of your observations into a pattern with distinctive stages. (2) **In analytic categories:** A student observing the behavior of

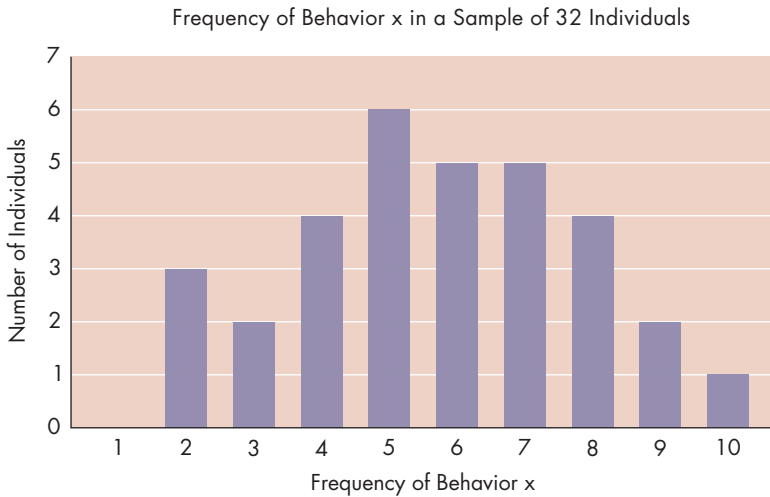


FIGURE 9.1 Graphing frequency data. Column graphs like this one can be useful for summarizing behavioral observations. The numbers on the horizontal axis represent the frequency, or number of occurrences, of a particular behavior. (An example might be the number of teacher-directed questions a student asks during a class). The vertical axis represents the number of individuals at each frequency. In this case, three individuals exhibited the behavior twice, two exhibited it three times, and so forth.

a preschool child used the following categories from the course textbook to present his findings: motor coordination, cognition, and socialization.

Note: You will find it easier to organize the enormous amount of data you gather for a case study if you develop stages or categories while you are making your observations. In your paper, be sure to illustrate your stages or categories with material drawn from your observations—with descriptions of people, places, and behavior, as well as with telling quotations.

6. Including a review of the literature, statement of your hypothesis, and description of your methodology in your introduction

The introduction presents the framework, background, and rationale for your study. Begin with the topic, and review related research,

CHARTING the TERRITORY**Case Studies**

You may be asked to write case studies in a number of social science and science disciplines.

- **In sociology:** You may be asked to draw on “insider” knowledge to describe and analyze a small group to which you have belonged or belong now. In this case, your study will address such issues as the group’s norms and values, cultural characteristics, stratification and roles, initiation rites, and social control techniques. Your audience will be your professor, who will want to see how your observations reflect current theories on group norms.
- **In nursing:** A case study assignment may be an important part of your practicum in a local hospital. For a nursing class, you will note details of your care of a patient that corroborate or differ from what you have been taught to expect. Your audience is the supervising nurse, who is interested in your interactions with the patient.
- **In education:** As a student teacher in a classroom, you may closely observe and write about one student in the context of his or her socioeconomic and family background. Your audience will be your supervising teacher, who seeks more insight into students’ behavior.

working your way to the specific question that your study addresses. Follow that with a statement of your hypothesis, accompanied by a description of your **methodology**—how, when, and where you made your observations and how you recorded them.

7. Discussing your findings in the conclusion

The conclusion of your case study should answer the following three questions: Did you find what you expected? What do your findings show, or what is the bigger picture? Where should researchers working on your topic go now?

9h Write interpretive papers in the sciences.

Many research papers in the sciences, like those in the social sciences, are interpretive as well as informative. As mentioned in Chapter 8, for example, interpretation is a crucial aspect of lab reports describing the results of original experiments designed to create new scientific knowledge.

Scientists, however, may also be called upon to analyze trends and make predictions in papers that do not follow the lab or research report model. In the following example, Carlos Jaspersen interprets historical data about hurricanes to see if they reveal trends in weather patterns.

Sample student interpretive paper in the sciences

Keeping an Eye on the Storms

In 2004, Florida was hit by 4 brutal hurricanes. Charley, Frances, Ivan, and Jeanne struck Florida within the space of just 2 months. On the Saffir-Simpson scale, which ranks hurricanes from 1 to 5 based on their wind speeds and destructive power, all but one of the storms (Frances) ranked 3 or higher, making them “major” storms ¹. In all, these 4 hurricanes killed 117 people and cost Florida over \$60 billion in damages ². When one considers the total number of hurricanes to make landfall in Florida during the 20th century—a total of 57 hurricanes, with 24 of them at category 3 or above ³—one can imagine the financial and emotional cost.

Interesting details capture readers' attention and use of statistics establishes authority.

Unfortunately, there is reason to believe that the years ahead could bring more of the same. Based on a variety of data, it seems at least possible that the 2005 hurricane season, or one closely following it, could again see multiple storms hitting the U.S. The “hurricane fatigue” that has plagued the state might be in for an encore.

Thesis stated.

Figure 1 shows a graph of the total number of hurricanes to strike the U.S. mainland by decade from 1900 through 1999 ⁴. A total of 165 hurricanes made landfall, with 65 of them at category 3 or above; however, the graph shows that over the past 30 years there have been relatively few hurricane strikes. The decade of 1970–1979 brought the fewest strikes of any decade this century; the decade of 1990–1999, the second fewest. The number of strikes for 1980–1989 was slightly below the century average. Additionally, in the year 2000, there were no hurricane strikes, a rare occurrence ³. Thus far this decade, there have been 8 strikes ⁵—another 8 hurricanes hitting the U.S. before 2010 would only make for a more or less typical decade. So, even if 16

Topic expanded from Florida to the country as a whole.

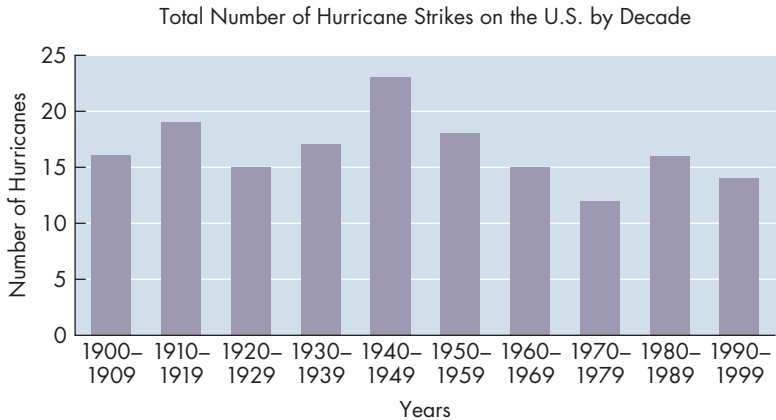


Figure 1 U.S. hurricane strikes by decade (from National Hurricane Center ⁴)

hurricanes strike the U.S. mainland during the years 2001–2009, this would only put the first decade of 2000 slightly above the average for the previous century.

First warning sign explained.

When compared with the first part of the century in terms of number of hurricanes, the last 30 years of the 20th century can be seen as a grace period from hurricanes. If a higher number of storms strike the U.S. in the first decade of the 21st century, then, it would not represent an aberration but rather a return to the statistical norm, something that hurricane experts see as inevitable. Thus, the relative lull in the number of hurricanes can be seen as a warning sign of sorts.

Second warning sign explained.

Another warning sign for the years ahead is the influx of warm water into the Atlantic Basin, where hurricanes begin and strengthen. Meteorologists connect this natural, cyclical warming to an increase in the number of hurricanes. The Atlantic Basin was most recently warmed in this way in the 1940s and 1950s ². As Figure 1 indicates, this was a time of relatively frequent hurricane hits. One could reasonably expect a similar increase in the coming years as the temperature rises again.

Also frightening is the fact that 4 hurricanes hitting the U.S. in one year, as they did in 2004, is not unprecedented. From 1900 to 2000,

there were 4 years in which 4 hurricanes struck³. So, there is no reason to expect that enduring 4 hurricanes in one year will guarantee fewer hurricanes in years to come. In fact, in 1906, 4 hurricanes struck, and then just 3 years later, in 1909, another 4 hurricanes struck. And 4 is not even the biggest wallop nature can pack. Twice in the last century, in 1916 and in 1985, 6 hurricanes struck the U.S. in the same year³. Clearly, although the cost of the 2004 hurricane season was nearly unbearable for Floridians, it could truly have been much worse, and might be in the seasons ahead.

Ultimately, there is no way to predict exactly where a hurricane will make landfall, despite the great strides that have been made in meteorology in the past few decades. The smartest thing for Floridians and the residents of other coastal states to do is to be prepared every year for a deadly storm. As 2004 taught us, nature's fury can be unforgiving.

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Point reinforced with grim statistics and prediction.

Conclusion stated succinctly.

References list follows CSE citation-sequence style and begins on a new page.