

Analysis and Interpretation

Interpretation happens when you take something that is unfamiliar and put it into the stream of everyday life. An interpreter for someone who speaks a different language takes something that is unrecognizable and turns it into something that is recognizable. Your interpretive essay's purpose, in other words, could be simply to rephrase what you have read into a more concise form for some intended audience. A *summary* repeats main points. A *response* might discuss the relationship of real readers to the book – Oprah's reading group, for instance, responds to the books by discussing what it meant to their lives.

However, interpretation also happens when you take something that seems familiar and you make it unfamiliar by looking at it in a new way, closer than you have before. The purpose here is to look beneath the surface for the deeper structures of the book, much like you would take apart a car engine and look at its component parts. I'll suggest two ways you can do this. 1) you look closely at one part and show how we can understand the whole book by looking at that one part; 2) by looking at ideas that seem to show up again and again and mapping them out. You can show how one section reveals something about the whole book, or you can show how something repeats over and over throughout the book. An *analysis*, in other words, deals closely with the text; it is your reactions to the text molded into arguments about what the text means. Here are other ways to think about analysis:

Analysis is a lot like the scientific method, and your paper can be structured as such, say with several paragraphs with each point:

1. Analysis begins with observations; you notice things by asking questions that seem relevant such as: why is the book structured like this? Why is it written from this point of view? why does a character do this? What are some objective correlatives that seem significant? Why does the book end the way it does? What does the title mean?
2. Make hypotheses, or guesses, about answers to these questions. Say: "I bet Piglet is the way he is because he is a foil."
3. Create an experiment to test your hypotheses. You might say, "If we look at the background of the author, I'll bet it would explain why he or she writes this way. "Or, "I'll bet every time this colour appears it means something significant. "Or, "I'll look for every scene with Piglet to see how he acts. "Go about proving your hypothesis by carrying out the experiment in the bulk of your paper. Dedicate a paragraph or so to each moment in the book you want to look at. Tear each piece apart and look at it from all angles, thinking about what it could mean.
4. Pull your conclusions together in a proposal about what your experiments seem to suggest. This need not be done in a conclusion, but in may be.

Or your paper can be structured in reverse. You can begin your paper with your conclusions, strongly arguing what you believe about the essay, then describe your experiment and show how it lead from conclusions you made.

Your **EVIDENCE** is the essay itself and any surrounding material that seems relevant.

Remember that in the standard communications model you have the following structure:

Sender Message Medium Interpretation Receiver

It is legitimate to talk about any area of this chart, discussing who sent the message (the author), what the message is (the story), how it was sent (the style), how it is interpreted by the reader (different interpretations), and what the background of the reader is (how children read). Remember that anything you might say about the book that I could know without reading the book is not analysis (“Children have vivid imaginations.”). **Anything you might say about the book that I could know just by reading the book once isn’t good analysis** (“*Where the Wild Things Are* is a beautiful book.”). Instead, you should imagine your audience to be someone who has read the book once, and knows the essential plot and qualities of the book, but hasn’t thought very deeply about it. Everything you argue should be your own thoughts, and should try to deal with the book below the surface.

You prove your argument by pointing to the book and demonstrating that it’s there. Typically, the best argument is the one that uses and discusses the best evidence. Therefore, **YOU MUST QUOTE TO PROVE YOU’RE POINTS**. Remember that you are providing an interpretation of the essay, and therefore you should remember that nothing can be taken for granted in the essay.

The following method to be quite useful in my experiences (note that the following underlined sentences fit together into a paragraph):

1. *Provide a general context for the quote* – a larger idea that the quote fits into (this isn’t always necessary, but occasionally provides nice transitions). Example: One of the most interesting aspects of the book is the way imagination is portrayed as a positive aspect.
2. *Lead up to the quote* with a discussion of what you will be quoting. Example: For instance, Willy Wonka sings a song early on about the power of ‘pure imagination.’
3. *Give the quote*, and connect it to your own words – in many cases, provide only part of the original sentence – a sophisticated writer knows how to use only sections of sentences – the quote should be short enough that you can discuss it in detail. Example: In the song he frequently calls his factory “a paradise” that can be viewed when one gives into desire. He says, for instance, “Whatever you want to do, do it” (40). {note: this page number is just a hypothetical example, but you should include them}
4. *Analyse the quote* by taking it out of context, or putting it in context, or critiquing the quote, or discussing its validity – some writers advocate the following rule of thumb: however long the quote is, you should spend twice as much space analysing it.
5. Specifically suggest ways it connects to other points in the essay, or larger issues, or another essay. Example: Therefore, unlike many other children’s

books, imagination is not seen immediately as something dangerous, until later in the book. {note: Here you could move on to talk about other positive examples, or you could provide those other examples in part 3, or you could move on to other parts of the essay. You do not have to do these in order, or only have one sentence for each, or only give one quote per paragraph, or even do all of them, but you should consider these points. You should be creative with how you use them. The point, however, is that you must *surround* your quotes with your own analysis. }

Remember to consider an essay as a window on larger issues, and consequently you should talk about the essay and those larger issues. You should ASK DISRESPECTFUL QUESTIONS. For instance, be a resisting reader and look for gaps in the book, things it doesn't seem to say.

Remember, analysis is not a matter of agreeing or disagreeing with a book or talking about whether it is good or not, but rather looking at it closely and reading it attentively, and ultimately saying something about what it means, what it reveals about deeper issues, or maybe how we can use it to understand other things.

A quick, but incomplete, guide to MLA documentation:

- there are numerous exceptions to these rules, and you should consult the MLA hand out for guidance
- all quotes should be attached to your own words!
- all words taken from the book should be surrounded by quotation marks
- anytime you paraphrase, meaning basically that you are talking about something that you learned from the book, you need to provide page numbers
- all quotes are followed by the following information in parentheses: if you do not mention the author's name in the sentence, you provide the name of the author – then space (no comma!) – Then the page number where the quote is taken from – then you closes the parentheses – then you put a period.