WRITING ABOUT LITERATURE
SYNTHESIS ESSAY

Grade 12
WRITING ABOUT LITERATURE — SYNTHESIS ESSAY

This handbook is designed to help students plan, organize and write a synthesis essay. It contains tips and examples to take you through each part of writing a synthesis essay—from reading the question to writing the essay.

What is a literary analysis?

When you read a literary work in an English class, you’re being asked to read in a special way: You’re being asked to perform literary analysis. Literary analysis involves examining all the parts of a literary work—elements such as character, setting, tone, and imagery—and thinking about how the author uses those elements to create certain effects.

What is an interpretation?

A literary analysis explains a literary work by means of interpretation. An interpretation is developed by an in-depth examination of a literary work, and proved by finding evidence in the literary work that supports the point(s) you are making in the literary analysis.

FAMILIARIZE YOURSELF WITH THE QUESTION

Read the question with care and identify the key verb and key words. Keep in mind that the exam marker only marks the responses to the key words in the question!

See this is action:

Assess the role that optimism plays in the lives of Jenny in “Circus in Town” and Chris Gardner in “Happiness for Sale.”

“Assess” — the key verb tells you how to structure your essay. For example, assess means to estimate the value of something based on some criteria and present a well informed judgment.

(See page 12 for list of key verbs.)

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KEEP TRACK OF YOUR READING

Transfer the question to the top of the page of the literary work that you are reading, and refer to it often. Use the question to set a purpose for your reading and to keep you on track during your reading.

CONTEXT STATEMENT
Read the short context statement (in bold print) for useful information. (E.g. Canadian author Sinclair Ross was writing during the Depression in the 1930s. In his fiction, he reveals the difficulties of farming in the Prairies.)

READ WITH A PENCIL IN HAND
Right now your job is to just read, collect ideas and evidence, and let it all “percolate”.

Step 1: Read and Label
- As you read the literary work, think about the overall message of the literary work. Ask yourself, “What does the author want me to think or believe after reading it?
- After reading each verse/paragraph, draw a line and write a brief label (5-7 words) to summarize the key points of your reading. The purpose of the label is to help you quickly identify the important key points that you will include in your essay outline.
- Occasionally, you will find a verse/paragraph that does not seem to accomplish much in that it will not help you to answer the essay question. Label it in the margin as N/I for “not important”.

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Step 2: Collect and Annotate Evidence
- Underline the passages, symbols, images, or scenes that deal with your essay question.
- In the margin, write short notes about what the words and phrases mean, why they are important, what they represent on a larger scale. These notes should be abbreviated, just what you need to remember your thoughts.
- Look for textual evidence in different parts of the literary works.

Tip
Prioritize the evidence. Ask yourself, “What are the strongest pieces of textual evidence? Number the textual evidence from the strongest evidence to the weakest evidence. Only the strongest evidence will be used in your essay outline.

Writing A Literary Analysis (Synthesis Essay)
Now that you have the evidence, your job is to construct a well-formed argument (in the form of a literary analysis) in the same way that a lawyer must build a case to defend a client.

Always, Always, Outline Your Essay!
Step 1: Go back and read through your labels and create a list of 3-5 key points that will be the “heart” of your essay.

See this in action:
- Optimistic spirit and outlook — both Jenny and Chris Gardner come from impoverished backgrounds and both are able to escape through the power of an optimistic spirit and outlook
– Jenny’s power of imagination — despite being denied the opportunity to attend the circus, Jenny is able to escape through her imagination and to envision a circus that is more glorious than the real event.
– Chris’ powers of positive attitude and goal setting — despite being a struggling single-father and living in a ghetto, Chris Gardner was able envision the possibility of a more prosperous future. He sets goals in order to become successful.

**Step 2:** Create a grid using the title of the works as organizers. Make a list of each key points and the evidence in the literary work that supports the point(s) you are making. It is important that you include evidence from different parts of the literary works.

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**See this in action:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>“Circus in Town”</th>
<th>“‘Happyness’ for Sale”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jenny’s optimism spurs imagination</td>
<td>Chris Gardner’s optimism spurs determination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(paragraph 22) “And there, in its dim, high stillness, she had her circus. Not the kind that would stop off at a little town. Not just a tent and an elephant or two. No —for this was her own circus; the splendid, matchless circus of a little girl who had never seen one.”</td>
<td>(paragraph 2) “So Garner worked, making 200 calls a day to snag clients for Dean Witter. ‘Every time I picked up the phone,’ he recalls, ‘I knew I was getting closer to digging myself out of the hole.’”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>other responses possible</em></td>
<td>(paragraph 18) goal setting/achieved wealth through “persistence, progress and faith”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**INTRODUCTION OR OPENING PARAGRAPH**

– Your introduction sets up the entire essay. It should be short and effective.
– It shows where you stand regarding the question (how you intend to answer it).
– It situates the reader and lets him or her know what to expect.
– It provides any necessary context —what works you are discussing, where you stand in regards to the question (how you intend to answer it), what big idea will you be addressing.

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– It presents your thesis. This usually happens at or very near the end of your introduction.

**See the introductory paragraph in action:**

Amid despair and hardship both Jenny in Jia Lynn Yang’s “‘Happyness’ for Sale” and Chris Gardner, in Sinclair Ross’ “Circus in Town” remain hopeful. Jenny is a young child living in the 1930s, while Chris Gardner is a struggling adult living in modern times. Optimism is the sole driving force which allows both Jenny and Chris Gardner to overcome dire circumstances and the doubts of others.

**BODY PARAGRAPHS**

Once you’ve written your introduction, you’ll take the points you developed and turn them into your body paragraphs. The body of your essay will be where you present most of your analysis.

**Step 1: Begin with a strong topic sentence.**

- Topic sentences are like signs on a highway: they tell the reader where they are and where they’re going.
- A good topic sentence not only alerts readers to what point will be discussed in the following paragraph but also gives them a sense of what argument will be made about that point.

**See the topic sentence (key point) in action:**

The power of maintaining an optimistic spirit and outlook creates an environment that enables both Jenny and Chris to overcome the harsh circumstances around them.

It not only tells us what the paragraph will discuss (optimism) but how the paragraph will discuss the topic (by showing how optimism creates a set of conditions that leads to changes circumstances. 

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Step 2: Fully and completely develop a single point.
- Don’t skip around in your paragraph or try to stuff in too much material. Body paragraphs are like bricks: Each individual one needs to be strong and sturdy or the entire structure will collapse. Make sure you have really proven your point before moving on to the next one.

Step 3: Use transitions effectively.
- Good literary essay writers know that each paragraph must be clearly and strongly linked to the material around it. Think of each paragraph as a response to the one that precedes it.
- Use transition words to indicate what kind of response you’re making (see chart on page 13).
# P.E.E. METHOD

## POINT
- The heart of your essay
- Open each body paragraph with topic sentences that includes a key point that in a clear way is helping to answer the question.

| (key idea) — power of optimistic spirit and outlook |
| (paragraph 1/point) Jenny’s optimism spurs imagination |
| (paragraph 2/point) Chris Gardner’s optimistic outlook spurs determination and goal setting |

## EVIDENCE
Examples from the text:
- Direct quotations
- Summaries of scenes
- Paraphrase

| (Jenny/paragraph 22) “And there, in its dim, high stillness, she had her circus. Not the kind that would stop off at a little town. Not just a tent and an elephant or two. No —for this was her own circus; the splendid, matchless circus of a little girl who had never seen one.” |
| (Chris/paragraph 2) “So Garner worked, making 200 calls a day to snag clients for Dean Witter. ‘Every time I picked up the phone,’ he recalls, ‘I knew I was getting closer to digging myself out of the hole.’ ” |
| (Chris/paragraph 17) “‘Baby steps count. But you’ve always got to be moving forward’ “. |
| (Chris/paragraph 18) achieved wealth through “persistence, progress and faith” |

## EXPLANATION
- The explanation works like a needle and thread, sewing point and evidence together to illustrate how they connect to one another.

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See the P.E.E. Method in action:

Maintaining an optimistic spirit and outlook enables both Jenny and Chris to overcome the dire circumstances in their lives. Through optimism, Jenny is able to find hope. This quote conveys to the reader Jenny’s ability to spirit herself away from despair and through her vivid imagination “to have her circus”. “Not the kind that would stop off at a little town. Not just a tent and an elephant or two. No —for this was her own circus; the splendid, matchless circus of a little girl who had never seen one.”

Whereas Jenny’s optimism prompts her imagination, Chris Gardner’s spurs determination. Though a homeless man, trapped in a desperate situation “raising his son alone” and living in “an apartment situated in the “ghettos of Oakland”, through pure will power Gardner manifests the life style he desires. His consistently optimistic mindset allows him to patiently tread through hardship and poverty. But most importantly, like Jenny, optimism allows Gardner to dream of moving forward. “ ‘Every time I picked up the phone,’ he recalls, ‘I knew I was getting closer to digging myself out of the hole.’ ” And though many people just dream, Chris Gardner thinks to himself “ ‘Baby steps count. But you’ve always got to be moving forward’ ”. Attributes such as “persistence, progress and faith”, all born from optimism, is how Chris Gardner is able to rise above hardship and to achieve success.

Tip

Use transitions to argue, explain and compare ideas.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Argue</th>
<th>however... therefore... because... but... and...</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>furthermore… also... in addition... then... as well as... next... whereas... in contrast... later... at first... similarly...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explain</td>
<td>this implies... this suggests... which gives the impression that... this shows... this clearly shows... possibly... perhaps... this indicates that... obviously... this conveys to the reader that... this is apparent...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compare</td>
<td>although this is true...at the same time...but...on the other hand...in comparison...however...meanwhile...nevertheless...on the contrary...conversely...</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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CONCLUSION

You use the conclusion to quickly summarize the specifics learned thus far and then hint at the broader implications of your topic. A good conclusion will:

- **Synthesize the arguments, not summarize them.** Similarly, don’t repeat the details of your body paragraphs in your conclusion.
- **Make a case for why your points are important.** What do your readers know now that they didn’t know before? How will that knowledge help them better appreciate or understand the work overall?
- **Stay relevant.** Your conclusion is not the time to pad your essay with all the extra, interesting ideas you came up but couldn’t fit into the essay proper.
- **Use transitions** such as: on the whole, summing up, to conclude, in conclusion, as I have shown, as I have said, hence, therefore, accordingly, thus, as a result, consequently, on the whole.

**See the conclusion in action:**

Optimism is the key aspect which frees both Jenny and Chris Gardner. Whether it is the attempt to fulfill a childhood dream of attending a circus, or a struggle to be successful in the harsh modern world, optimism paves the way to success for both Jenny and Chris.

**tip**

At the conclusion of each paragraph **ALWAYS:**

At the conclusion of each paragraph **ALWAYS:**

- **Check that each paragraph does more than summarize the text.** I should analyze textual passages according to the thesis assertion. You will lose marks if you just retell.
- **Open each paragraph with a topic sentence.** This is a sentence that clearly makes a point that is to be developed in your argument. Use your topic sentence to keep you on track in your writing.
- **Check back to make certain that you are still answering the question you have been asked** (many students gradually drift off the question as the essay goes on).

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- **Miss a line** between paragraphs so the marker can clearly see where your next point begins.
- **Write a conclusion.** A conclusion consists of 2-3 sentences but these will need to be convincing and authoritative. It is crucial to keep the conclusion brief and to the point and, above all else, do not introduce new material in the conclusion.
- **Use literary vocabulary such as** “work of literature”, literary work, not “story”.

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**EDIT**

1. Read your essay aloud to check for overall sense and sound.
2. Check your sentences for rhythm, balance, and correctness. Does each sentence express a complete thought (no fragments)? Is each punctuated as a complete sentence (no comma splices or run-ons)?
3. Make sure your writing is concise. Take out any words, phrases, or ideas which are repeated unnecessarily, which sound flowery, or which pad rather than add to an explanation.
4. Study each paragraph for overall effectiveness and **clarity**. Does each paragraph have a clear purpose and focus (topic sentence)? Have you used appropriate transitions within and between paragraphs?

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**PROOFREAD - 3 TRICKS**

1. Check your writing for any words or phrases which may have been left out.
2. Check your writing for spelling, capitalization and punctuation errors.
3. Read once for grammar and spelling.
Amid despair and hardship both Jenny in Jia Lynn Yang’s “‘Happyness’ for Sale” and Chris Gardner, in Sinclair Ross’ “Circus in Town” remain hopeful. Jenny is a young child living in the 1930s, while Chris Gardner is a struggling adult living in modern times. Optimism is the sole driving force which allows both Jenny and Chris Gardner to overcome harsh circumstances and the doubts of others.

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Optimism is the key aspect which frees both Jenny and Chris Gardner. Whether it is the attempt to fulfill a childhood dream of attending a circus, or a struggle to be successful in the harsh modern world, optimism paves the way to success for both Jenny and Chris.

349 words
### KEY VERBS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Assess:</strong></th>
<th>Estimate the value of something based on some criteria; present an informed judgment.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Discuss:</strong></td>
<td>Present the various points of view in a debate or argument; engage in written discourse on a particular issue.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Evaluate:</strong></td>
<td>Use criteria or standards to make judgments about the strengths and weaknesses of a position on a particular issue.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Explain:</strong></td>
<td>Give an account of a topic, process, or concept, providing evidence and reasons.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>To What Extent</strong></td>
<td>Advance arguments in favour of a position or point of view and respond to or take into account arguments opposed to that position or point of view.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Compare</strong></td>
<td>Describe how the elements or qualities of one event, issue of character are similar to those of another. See contrast.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Contrast</strong></td>
<td>Describe how the elements or qualities of one event, issue of character are different from those of another. See compare.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Describe</strong></td>
<td>Give a detailed or graphic account of an object, event, or concept.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>