

Avoiding Plot Summary

One danger of writing a literature essay is offering a plot summary rather than a critical analysis. Your reader has almost certainly read the piece of literature you're writing about; if they are marking your paper, then they're probably very familiar with it. As they read your paper, they are looking for **insightful analysis** of, and **critical engagement** with, the text—not a rehashed storyline. The following points should help you meet this expectation.

Offer background information

Some background information is essential for context. Specify the work's title, author, and your chosen theme—for example, "Milton's *Paradise Lost* offers insights into the Christian view of gender and authority"—to introduce the reader to your subject matter. (See our resource on [introductions](#) for more detailed guidance on this aspect of your paper.)

Know how to analyze

To [analyze](#) a literary work, you'll need to first read it very carefully; you'll need to read at least some sections of it—those you wish to focus on—two or three times. Take your time and look for detail as well as overall structure, themes, plot and character development, setting, language choice, etc. If you aren't certain how to approach these elements of literary writing, consider looking them up in a dictionary of literary terms (commonly available in the library); it's a very efficient way to get a handle on them.

Analyzing means pulling apart the section you wish to focus on, breaking it down into its elements, looking for connections within that section and perhaps also to the broader work as a whole. Analysis also demands your own critical thinking skills and interpretation. You have many options for approaching a textual analysis; for example, you might:

- use lecture topics, the course learning objectives, or other course readings as a springboard for identifying a way "into" the work
- engage with the text through a particular theoretical lens
- do a close reading
- compare the work with another text, focusing on one literary device or theme they have in common
- read a published critical analysis of some aspect of the work, identify a gap in the scholar's coverage or understanding, and move forward from there.

Think of analysis as taking a text apart, looking around at the component parts, identifying new connections or patterns, and curating the pieces to support your argument and insights. It's a chance for you to think for yourself, creatively and authoritatively.

The Harvard College Writing Center also offers very useful resources on [literary analysis](#) and [close readings](#).

Support with description

Describe plot events only to support a specific argumentative point. Suppose you were talking to a friend about a recent episode of a favourite TV show, and you said, “That was a great episode: Torben thought Kasper was cheating on him so he tried to make him jealous by pretending to be attracted to someone else, and it backfired.” Your friend might say, “But I saw all that myself; what about it?” — rightly objecting to your summarizing the story with no apparent point. But suppose you were to say, “Torben’s character is becoming more manipulative; his loaded comment to Kasper about “really connecting” with Philip seemed more devious than usual.” In this case, you would be using a particular plot event to support your point about character development; in order to convince your friend, you must share an example with which they are familiar.

The same is true for a literature essay: any plot description or summary of contents must support a point—not substitute for one. You should ask yourself the question your marker is sure to ask: “Why is this important?” In other words, what is the significance of this element of the work in relation to the point you wish to make? [Read on](#) for an example of the difference between summarizing content and using that content to make a point.

Examples

The following two paragraphs discuss the same passage from Shakespeare’s *1 Henry IV*. Only one of these, however, would be considered acceptable in a university English essay: Example B analyses and interprets plot events rather than simply recounting them. Example A is merely plot summary, contributing little to our understanding of the **significance** of the scene.

1. In the first scene, King Henry compares his own son, Hal, unfavourably with Northumberland’s warrior son Hotspur. He says that Hotspur is “the theme of honour’s tongue,” whereas the wastrel Hal is stained by “riot and dishonour.” The king wishes that some fairy had exchanged the two in infancy so that he (and the nation) might now have a more suitable prince. Henry then asks his counsellors the meaning of Hotspur’s withholding from the crown a number of Scottish prisoners recently taken in battle. Westmoreland replies that this apparent disloyalty is not the fault of Hotspur but of his malevolent uncle, Worcester, who has induced Hotspur to “prune himself” and “bristle up / The crest of youth against your dignity.”
2. King Henry’s unfavourable comparison of Hal’s “riot and dishonour” with the heroic virtues of Hotspur (“the theme of honour’s tongue”) introduces the two main characters, even though they have not yet appeared on stage. It also establishes from the outset the conflict between the King and his son and sets up an important structural feature of the play, the juxtaposed careers of Hal and Hotspur. We are, furthermore, alerted to the play’s preoccupation with the theme of “honour.” In this passage, Shakespeare has two different young men “bristle up / The crest of youth” against the “dignity” of the king and sets in motion several of the central dramatic elements of this work.

Resources

Shakespeare, W.; Weil, H.; Weil, J. (2007). *The First Part of King Henry IV*, Updated edition. Cambridge University Press.

Syba, M. (2008). *A Brief Guide to Writing the English Paper*. Harvard College Writing Centre. https://hwpi.harvard.edu/files/hwp/files/bg_writing_english.pdf.