Analyzing a Short Story (10 steps)

Step 1: Know the Assignment — If you are assigned to analyze a short story, you are being asked to identify your personal reaction to the work and develop a clear explanation of your reaction, providing supporting arguments. You may be required to provide support from external sources (books, articles, etc.). These assignments are usually written in the third person, present tense. Remember: An analysis is not a simple recitation of the plot.

Step 2: Read — Read the entire short story, trying to identify the writer’s main idea.

Step 3: Review — Summarize the story in your own words, using no more than two sentences.

Step 4: Read the story a second time to analyze how the author has supported his or her ideas. Take notes, including page numbers for future reference. Examine the literary elements used by the author. Some possible elements you might find that contribute to the meaning of the story or the author’s purpose include the following:

* Allusion — Does the author refer to any past literary source or event in history? For example, many authors use Biblical allusions.
* Character — What are the qualities reflected in the actions and/or thoughts of the individual figures in the plot? Are the characters dynamic (changing) or static (unchanging)?
* Figurative language — (metaphor, simile, etc.) Is language used to help a reader understand the characters or to help establish the significance of theme and tone?
* Imagery — Does the author use imagery to advance the story or provide insight to the characters? If so, why? Imagery includes the senses (sight, sound, etc.).
* Point-of-view — Who is telling the story and what does he or she know (or not know)? Is the tale told by an omniscient (all-knowing) narrator who doesn’t interact in the events, or is it presented by one of the characters within the story?
* Plot — Is the story logical? If not, why not?
* Setting — Does the time period, location, time of day, season, weather, or any other setting play a role in understanding the author’s intent?
* Symbolism — Does a character or element of the story represent something else?
* Tone — How does the author feel about the work? How does the author make the reader feel about the characters? Sympathetic? Humorous? How does this tone affect the story?

Step 5: Find examples — Identify examples of elements in the short story to support your assignment or proposed thesis. Find specific details and avoid making general statements without examples. Underline important passages.

Step 6: Write a thesis statement for your paper — Based on the evidence that relates to your topic—and what you anticipate you might say about those pieces of evidence—create a working thesis. Use the example below as a guide.

Sample thesis statement: Integrated into the plot is Aikman’s real theme of the camaraderie shared by those facing death and the need to sacrifice oneself for the good of many.
Step 7: Create an outline

I. Introductory paragraph (general introduction, summary of the story, and thesis statement).

II. First element you will discuss (first body paragraph)
   A. evidence (examples, citations)
   B. evidence (examples, citations)

III. Second element you will discuss (second body paragraph)
   A. evidence (examples, citations)
   B. evidence (examples, citations)

IV. Concluding paragraph

Note: Longer papers probably will have more than two body paragraphs.

Step 5: Write — Introduce the work in your first paragraph by identifying the title and author, possibly using the following format as a guide:

Malcolm Aikman’s “The Columbus Raid” is a short story illustrating the plight of a young American who volunteers to help a guerrilla group during the Mexican Civil War of the early 1900’s. At the story’s heart is a compelling depiction of the protagonist, Tom Mix, whose sense of duty conflicts with his love for one of the guerrillas, Maria. Integrated into the plot is Aikman’s real theme of the camaraderie shared by those facing death and the need to sacrifice oneself for the good of many. Aikman achieves this effect through his use of character, plot, symbolism, and setting.

Step 6: Support — Write your body paragraphs following your outline, making certain that each body paragraph has a topic sentence and specific supports.

Step 7: Conclude — Write the final paragraph, restating the thesis in different words. Do not introduce any new ideas at this point. End with a statement that draws a conclusion.

Example:
Aikman successfully utilizes four basic tools to illustrate the plight of a man torn by love and war: character, plot, symbolism, and setting. His combination of these tools in “The Columbus Raid” reveals a greater theme of the story — camaraderie and sacrifice. These two human elements remain timeless and universal, forcing readers to contemplate the tragic consequences of war and duty.

Step 8: Revise — Make certain that your essay provides support for the thesis statement, follows applicable style (MLA or instructor’s guidelines), and flows smoothly from point to point and introduction to conclusion. Remember: Your teacher is expecting your analysis, not a plot summary.

Step 9: Proofread — Edit your paper for spelling and grammatical errors.

Step 10: Seek advice — If you are in doubt about any aspect of your essay, including format and topic, schedule an appointment with your teacher or a conference in the ASC Writing Center.

NOTE: More handouts are available at the following ASC website.

http://www.irsc.edu/students/academicsupportcenter/writinglab/writinglab.aspx?id=943