

How to Write a Short Story Analysis Paper

1. Choose a story and re-read it.

Example: I liked the story “Good Country People”; I’ll read it again.

2. React personally. What aspects of the story do you seem to be most affected by? You should look at more than one aspect.

Example: I find when I look at how I reacted in my journal to this story, what I really liked about it was the way the plot developed. I was really surprised at the climax – when Manley took Hulga’s leg and left her stranded. It was funny, yet sad at the same time. I also enjoyed the way the plot “unraveled” after that, going to Mrs. Freeman and Mrs. Hopewell’s remarks as they saw Manley go by in the distance.

3. Determine the theme of the story. What is the main point? HINT: Try to complete this sentence: This story argues that ...

Example: I think the theme is that people are often not what they appear to be on the outside (Manley). Also, people are often not who they really think they are (Hulga, Mrs. Hopewell).

4. Connect #2 & 3: How do you see this aspect and the theme relating?

Example: The theme is that people are often not as we expect them to be. The plot illustrates or supports this theme because the plot did not develop as I expected it to. At the climax Manley shows that he is not “good country people” and Hulga learns that she is not as smart as she thinks she is.

Now BRAINSTORM on this connection.

Example: The unstable situation that begins the plot is the relationship between Joy and her Mother. Mrs. Hopewell cannot see her daughter (or anyone else) as she really is. The daughter, Hulga/Joy, cannot see herself as she really is. The conflicts that move the plot along involve the mother trying to maintain her preconceived notions about people (seeing Manley as “good country people” even though he barged in on them at dinner time, Mrs. Freeman as a lady and her daughters as the “finest girls”). Also the plot is moved by Joy/Hulga’s internal conflicts, trying to define herself as intellectually and philosophically superior to those around her, seeing herself as the sophisticated seducer of Manley Pointer ... etc.

5. Re-read the story again looking specifically at your chosen aspect. Find places in the text where you see this aspect relating to the theme.

Example: Unstable situation – “Mrs. Hopewell thought of [Joy] as a child though she was thirty-two years old and highly educated” (105).

“Mrs. Hopewell likes to tell people that Glynese and Carramae were two of the finest girls she knew and that Mrs. Freeman was a lady and that she was never ashamed to take her anywhere or introduce her to anybody they might meet” (105).

Rising Action: Mrs. Hopewell is finding it hard to stick to her “clichés”: “‘Won’t you stay for dinner? We’d love to have you!’ and was sorry the instant she heard herself say it” (111).

Hulga maintains her superiority to others: “[Manley] crossed the highway and said, ‘I knew you’d come!’ The girl wondered acidly how he had know this” (115). Etc...

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6. Evaluate the material you have developed. Do you have enough for a three-page paper? If yes, determine the working thesis of your essay and move on to step 7.

Example: In O'Connor's short story "Good Country People" the plot and its unexpected climax are essential to supporting the theme of people are not often what they seem, even to themselves. If no, you do not have enough material for a full paper, return to step 2 and find a second aspect to focus on.

Example: In my journal I reacted personally to how the characters are created. I think it is interesting that most of what we know about Joy/Hulga is through what the narrator says about her and how other characters react to her and say to her. The reader doesn't get much information about the daughter from her own actions or what she says directly. One interesting occurrence when Hulga does speak up for herself: when her mother wanted her to walk the field with her, Hulga says, "If you want me, here I am – LIKE I AM" (107). Ironic? I think, in addition to plot, that I will look at how characterization adds to the theme: Hulga can't reveal herself directly to the reader because she doesn't know herself well enough – people are often not what they seem even to themselves.

BRAINSTORM: What different sides of Hulga do we see in this story? Are these revealed in different ways by the author (directly, indirectly)? Does Hulga have an epiphany at the climax? Does this change her, i.e. does she ever really see the "real" Hulga? Etc..

Next, find specific textual evidence to support what you want to say about characterization.

7. Impose order to your findings. What is the most logical and compelling way to present your material? Some natural guides for order:

- Chronological (if dealing with a chronological plot)
- The order of the story
- Cause and Effect
- Build an argument, starting with the least compelling evidence and building to the most impressive point.

If you are discussing more than one element of the story, which should go first? Do you want to start with the main focus and present the other(s) as supporting material? Or do you want to start with the more obvious material and build to the most interesting and insightful? These are stylistic choices you need to make.

Make an outline.

Example:

I. Introduction

A. Introduce O'Connor's story

B. Present Thesis: The plot structure and characterization create and reinforce the story's main theme: people are often unable or unwilling to see people, including themselves, as they really are.

II. Plot

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A. Unstable Situation

1. Main conflict
2. Supporting conflicts

B. Rising Action

1. least compelling textual example
2. more compelling textual example
3. most compelling textual example

C. Climax

1. ECT

III. Characterization

A. Direct methods

1. least compelling textual example
2. more compelling textual example
3. most compelling textual example

B. Indirect methods

Etc...

IV. Conclusion

8. Write the body of the essay.

Put your thesis in front of you as you lay out your argument as quickly and as fully as possible. Do not worry about an introduction as this time.

9. Read over your essay as a whole. NOW write the introduction to your essay.

10. Re-read and Edit. Make sure every point you make is supported with evidence. Make sure all quotes are set up and explained. Make sure that everything that you are saying ultimately supports your thesis.

11. Write the conclusion of your essay.