Analyzing Literature

Understanding
Before you begin, it is important to read, re-read, and take notes in order to gain a solid understanding of plot within your chosen piece of literature. Every story is a small sliver of time in which there is always tension.

**Tension**: mental or emotional strain; a feeling of nervousness that makes you unable to relax; barely controlled hostility or a strained relationship between people or groups.

**Chronic tension** is the dark cloud that hangs over your story—an element that can be ignored, but persists as a huge and long lasting problem. **Acute tension**, however, is a fire that needs to be put out immediately.

This situation, this time in which the character(s) can’t get a break, merges with the bigger chronic issue and causes the world of the story to climax. After this point in the story, something in the life of the character(s) has changed and cannot be the same again. It is a “point of no return.”

A literary analysis highlights the subtle patchwork of literary elements that the author uses to make this tension important and realistic.

Writing
Your literary analysis should argue that your unique interpretation of a piece of literature is valid. This perspective should be obvious in the thesis statement—the most specific sentence in your paper. The thesis must be debatable, not based on fact, or else the entire analysis would be irrelevant.

Perhaps, your instructor has given you a list of topics to write about. However, your original thesis should stress one or more of these topics while giving you the freedom to organize the evidence according to patterns that you notice. A literary analysis can be organized by the progression of time, characters, relationships, or along social contexts and ideals.

The body of your analysis will be used to defend this thesis with reasons and evidence drawn from the text (direct quotations, paraphrases, and summaries of scenes). Explain the significance with your own reasoning while resisting the urge to summarize the entire story—unless it is required by your assignment guidelines.

A successful analysis will draw your knowledge of the elements of fiction close to the reader’s understanding of the story. It should refer to the piece of literature in the present tense and assert the writer’s opinion while maintaining standards of academic writing, like avoiding slang terms and pronouns like “you” and “I.”
Elements of Fiction

Setting/Scene
This element refers to the time, place, and social environment that frames the characters. Sometimes the setting is lightly sketched, presented only because the story has to take place somewhere and at some time. Setting can be used to evoke a mood or atmosphere that will prepare the reader for what is to come.

Character
This fictional person allows the reader to empathize and view the story as a part of reality. Writers can show the characters in action or present them in a way that they can define each other.

- **Dynamic** characters change over time, usually as a result of going through strain.
- **Static** characters do not change over time.

The **protagonist** is the central person in the story. He or she is faced with tension that must be resolved.

An **antagonist** represents an obstacle that the protagonist has to overcome.

Narrator's Point-of-View
The narrator should not be confused with the story’s author, who should be completely detached from the text.

- **Third Person** (He, She, It, They)
  This narrator tells the story from a detached, objective point of view and can be considered as a ghost hovering over the story. A third person narrator may be limited to observing actions, or he/she may be omnipotent—aware of what the characters are thinking.

- **Second Person** (You)
  This point of view is often used when the narrator is giving directions, offering advice, speaking to a younger version of himself/herself, or attempting to be distant from the story for emotional reasons.

- **First Person** (I, We)
  This narrator is a character through which the story is told. The reader knows the world of the story through how that character is seeing, smelling, hearing, tasting, and thinking. This perspective creates an intimate relationship between him/her and the reader.

Voice/Style
This element highlights the way a writer chooses words, arranges them, and exploits their significance.

Symbolism
This element shows how a person, object, image, word, or event can evoke a range of additional meanings beyond and usually more abstract than its literal significance. Symbols are devices for evoking complex ideas without having to resort to explanations.

- **Conventional symbols** have meanings that are widely recognized by a society or culture.

  Literary or **Contextual symbols** can be a setting, character, action, or anything else in a specific work that maintains its literal significance while suggesting other meanings.

Shape/Theme/Tradition
This element provides a unifying theme around which the progression of a story is organized. A unique piece of fiction can follow paths that allow it to be identified along common situations that create tension, such as the story of a gathering, romance, or a coming of age.