

Literary Studies and Interpreting Literary Texts

The main difference between high school and college-level literary studies is **interpretation**.

In high school you build the foundational skills needed to understand the world around you; thus basic literary studies often focus on **understanding** texts—identifying characters, mapping the plot, defining terms, and generally knowing what happened.

- For example, in high school we learn *The Great Gatsby* is “about” the way the green light symbolizes Gatsby’s dream of repeating the past with Daisy, or it is “about” recognizing the themes of the American dream or the Jazz Age. High school often asks students to identify or locate what is already within the text itself.

In college, however, you strive to develop professional-level, independent, critical thinking skills that allow you to solve problems and develop original ideas on your own. College-level literary courses focus on **interpreting** the meaning and significance of what happened in the texts and how the text represents those events.

- For example, in college you would be responsible for interpreting **what it means and why it is important** that Tom Buchanan talks about white supremacist texts over dinner, why an African American witness identifies the car that strikes Myrtle Wilson, why the narrator claims this is really a story about the West, and how all of those details connect together to explain the significance of *The Great Gatsby*.

As scholars who study literature, it is our job to **interpret the meaning and patterns within texts to learn more about language, culture, history, society, power, art, and ourselves**. The literary scholar must read closely and analyze the details of the text in order to reassemble those details in a coherent argument about the meaning of the overall text. Literary scholars write arguments to convince others to interpret texts as they do.

Rules for writing papers that analyze and interpret texts.

- Your papers should answer the question: how does the way the text is written affect its meaning? The way the text is written can include any of several features:
 - the **genre(s)** to which it belongs and the ways it follows or breaks the rules of its genre(s).
 - the narrative **structure**, including the order of events, the perspective and/or credibility of the narrator or speaker, the resolution or lack of closure provided at the end, etc. Note: prose texts (novels, stories, essays) have narrators, but poems have speakers.
 - the interactions among **characters** and which characters are represented sympathetically or unsympathetically.
 - the use of **language**, especially literary figures such as imagery, metaphor, rhyme, meter.
 - the representations of major **cultural and social issues** of the text’s time, such as gender, class, race, nature, progress, sexuality, conflict, and other human themes.
 - the role of the text in **changing or adding to** the direction of the literary tradition, either as an example of the literary movements of its own time period or in comparison with **literary movements of various times, places, or particular groups of writers**.
 - the **similarities** in plot, character, theme, or imagery **with other texts**.
 - the representation of **theoretical concepts** revealed and explored within the text.
- The point of literary analysis is to find meaning in the representations provided within the text, *whether the author intended them or not*. You know you are right if your interpretation is consistent with the details of the entire text.
- Literary analysis papers may often *discuss* moral choices and social issues or teach us lessons about ourselves, but such papers are not ABOUT those issues nor about the way we feel about them. Literary analysis is about the way language attempts to **represent** those issues and human experiences and how readers can find meaning within those **representations**.