Teaching the Literary Analysis Essay

by Matthew Brown
STEP 1: IGNORE THE PROMPT

Writing a literary analysis essay is about textual analysis, not prompt analysis.

Too often, students get the impression that there is one “right answer,” and if they study the prompt long enough, they will discover what that answer is--that the key to a good essay is hidden within the prompt. AP teachers can add to this problem when they say that AP stands for Attack the Prompt. It’s creative, but wrong. When we adhere to that motto, we put too much emphasis on the wrong text. It’s time we de-emphasize the importance of the prompt.

One Rule

In a literature course, students are exposed to various texts types but literary texts are at the heart of what is taught. This is obviously true for an AP Lit course, so when students write about literary texts, they need to understand that genre of writing. Literary analysis has certain expectations, and there is one simple rule students must understand:

Insight into the theme of a literary text is at the heart of every literary analysis paper.

When we talk about literature, we talk about what the author is communicating, or at least our interpretation of that message. That analysis can take many turns as we help students expand their understanding of literary lenses. But, too often we try to help students crack the code of AP prompts as though those prompts are asking students to do something
different with literary analysis. It is easy to see why that would happen. Look at the following Q2 prompt from the 2014 AP exam:

The following passage is from the novel The Known World by Edward P. Jones. Read the passage carefully. Then, in a well-organized essay, analyze how the author reveals the character of Moses. In your analysis, you may wish to consider such literary elements as point of view, selection of detail, and imagery.

Stumbling Blocks

There are two stumbling blocks in this prompt (and all AP Lit prompts). First, students will think this is an essay about the character Moses. If they think this, they will become quickly frustrated when they are only given about a page of text to work with — not a lot of character development there. The second, and most problematic is the list of literary terms students are given. In a scramble to get a grip on their essay, they will use this as the organizing structure for their essay. That is the surest way to an average, boring essay especially when students have not been taught how to handle literary terms appropriately (see Step 3 of this guide).

The Importance of Theme

So, what should they do? Remind them (again and again and again), that getting at the theme of a literary text is the name of the game. When they look at the prompt, they should only be looking for one thing: What aspect of this text should be used to talk about the theme? In this case, it is the character of Moses.

This may be hard for students at first. It can be helpful, then, to give them a sentence frame to help construct a thesis/claim for their literary analysis. I like to use the following:

In the genre “title,” author conveys (reveals, communicates, shows etc) THEME through AP prompt focus.

So, for The Known World prompt, one could write:
In the selection from the novel *The Known World*, Edward P. Jones reveals the deeply personal impact bondage has on a man through the character of Moses, a slave.

OR

In the selection from the novel *The Known World*, Edward P. Jones shows the duality of the natural world, the bondage and freedom it provides for the slave Moses.

Sophistication is always something to strive for. Over time, students will hopefully be able to take the sentence frame for the theme and do something more with it. For example, the first thesis I gave could become:

The personal impact that bondage has on the slave Moses in the selection from Edward P. Jones’s novel *The Known World* is cruelly revealed in the false sense of freedom he experiences.

The theme obviously does not come from the prompt; that comes from a critical reading of the text. That is key. Students need to get past the prompt so that they can READ THE TEXT. Then, using the prompt, they can frame a thesis that drives a complex and sophisticated discussion of the text. And, yes, they will then be better able to use literary terms as they discuss how an author uses certain literary techniques to help us better understand that theme.

**Final Thoughts**

Let’s remember that literary analysis is at the heart of our work, not prompt analysis. We need to give our students the keys to unlock this genre of writing and get to meaningful work with the texts they are reading.
STEP 2: TAKE A ROAD TRIP

Writing an essay should be about profound thinking not writing to a formula.

If there is a metaphor I use for writing a literary analysis paper it is this:

*think of writing like taking a road trip.*

If Point A equals the claim/thesis and Point B equals the conclusion, then our job in an essay is to get from Point A to Point B. How that is done, though, is really up to the writer, which is the beauty of this metaphor. There is no formula to follow; there is only meaning to be made in the writing experience. Just like there are many routes one can take on a road trip, there are many directions a writer can take with their analysis in an essay. Even so, they are always working towards a destination. Everything a student writes in an essay must be working towards that end.

In Step 1 of this guide, I discussed how a writer must establish his or her focus in a literary analysis essay. I have suggested that focus should be on the theme of the text as illuminated potentially by character development, the setting, the conflict, frankly anything in the text. It is the starting point, but it isn’t the whole picture. I have discovered that too much emphasis on a claim/thesis can actual hinder students. Some actually don’t know what else to do. They answered the prompt (or so they think) in one simple statement, so what should they do next?

The Destination

The key is to provide a destination to the essay. The thesis is nice, but what do they ultimately want to have said about a text once they have finished their essay? A student (and any writer, for that matter) needs to say something profound if their writing is to rise above other writers. So, immediately after crafting a strong thesis, I have my students write out what will be the last (profound!) statement of their essay.

At first, these statements might just be a final sentence, but over time, they develop into more. My AP students have recently finished essays on the
novel *Crime and Punishment*. They were given the option to examine the duality that exists in the character of Raskolnikov or they could use the Q3 prompt on exile from the 2010 AP Lit test.

Here are a couple examples of thesis sentences and final statements from those essays:

**EXAMPLE 1**

Thesis

*Merely a prostitute, exile allowed Sonia to see past societal roles and rely on something other than herself, enriching her life and leading to redemption.*

Final statement

*Exile, capable of destruction, transformed Sonia into a redeemer. Her alienation did not render her incapable in life, but rather built her into a newer, more loving person.*

**EXAMPLE 2**

Thesis

*Ranging from the depths of reclusiveness to the heights of generosity, Dostoyevsky's fractured portrayal of the criminal psyche of Raskolnikov questioned what classifies a person as evil.*

Final statement

*He was a man divided from the beginning; for while he murdered, he gave money, and while he held the rich in contempt, he compassionately held a poor prostitute in his arms. In displaying such dualism, Dostoyevsky unflinchingly cracks open his protagonist to delve into the dark corridors of every human heart. By forcing his audience to contemplate what truly qualifies as crime, what truly qualifies as evil, Dostoyevsky's complex portrait of Raskolnikov offers a terrifyingly simple prospect: that no one is truly good.*
You’ll notice that the final statements echo the thesis, and they should. Yet, the thinking is deeper and more sophisticated. More importantly, the thinking that went into the creation of those final statements helped students to cognitively work out what they were going to say in their essay.

Read, Talk, and Write

This kind of thinking does not come easily, and students do need to possess some sophistication in their reading (and analysis) to provide this kind of insight. If you’re wondering what is the best way to get that out of your students, the simple answer is to have them read, talk, and write and then read, talk, and write some more. I would also recommend that students read How to Read Literature Like a Professor by Thomas C. Foster, and you can check out a recent blog on Edutopia by Rusul Alrubail on Teaching Literary Analysis.

I like using the term invention to describe this stage in the writing process. It is the initial stage of constructing meaning through writing about literature. Students write just two statements (maybe even just two sentences), but the powerful thinking that goes into shaping those statements can be truly remarkable. Watching students revise and refine their ideas even at this stage is truly something to celebrate. Why? Because I want my students to be thinkers, not just writers. When students put energy into thinking through what they want to say about a literary text, then they have become literary critics.

STEP 3: DON’T POINT

Literary analysis essays should show that a student understands the function of a literary term

Once students have their starting place (thesis) and their destination (final profound statement) established, they have already done a considerable amount of thinking about the analysis that will need to be done to get them from Point A to Point B. How successful they are at this analysis depends on a number of factors, though. There is no doubt that the student who is
well-read has the advantage, but our job is to help all students. What can we do to help that student get from a 2 to a 3 or a 3 to a 4 on the test?

**Literary Elements**

One way comes in the form of literary terms we introduce and teach to our students. It’s the academic language of the literature class. Unfortunately, we often teach this important aspect of literary analysis incorrectly. Let’s look at how I used to teach literary terms:

*Me:* Does anyone know what a simile is?

*Ophelia:* It’s a comparison of two things using like or as.

*Me:* That’s correct! Now let’s look at the poem on page 234 of your literature book. I want you to read through it and find all the similes.

Then I wait while the students read the poem. Maybe I even read it out loud to them.

*Me:* So, has anyone found a simile?

*Hamlet:* I did. My mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun.

*Me:* Wonderful. Good job.

This is a bit of an exaggeration, but you get the idea. Many teachers simply look at vocabulary instruction as an activity where students define terms. But, this is only part of the work. Our goal in teaching literary terms should never be that students simply learn the terms. If this is all we do, they our students will most likely struggle with analysis in an essay.

Look at the poetry prompt from the 2014 exam:

The following poem is by the sixteenth-century English poet George Gascoigne. Read the poem carefully. Then write an essay in which you analyze how the complex attitude of the speaker is developed through such devices as form, diction, and imagery.

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Three Devices

Both the poetry and prose prompts will frame the analysis around (usually) three literary devices. There have even been Q3 prompts focusing on a literary term (bildungsroman in 2013, setting/surroundings in 2012, and symbol in 2009). The problem is that students who have done nothing more than find examples of literary devices within a text will write an entire essay that simply does a lot of pointing--here’s a simile and here’s an example of diction and one of imagery.

Worse yet, students will use these literary terms as a way to structure their essay. Each will get its own paragraph. From the 2014 poetry prompt, this would mean that students would devote an entire paragraph to form (it’s a sonnet and here’s how you can tell), one to diction (the author uses a lot of good diction), and one for imagery (the author’s use of imagery in this line makes me feel ___ ).

So what should a teacher do with literary terms?

We must teach the academic language of the literature classroom in such a way so that students are then able enter into the discourse of the literary world.

The Importance of Why

This means that we must put more emphasis on discussing (analyzing) why an author uses these literary devices within a text. In a student essay posted by the College Board as an example response to the poetry prompt above, the writer quickly identifies the poem as a sonnet since it follows all the rules for a sonnet, but then s/he follows that up by saying that “while the standard and rigid form is effective in proving the speaker’s point and supporting his argument, it at first seems a little too rigid to convey the depths of his emotions.” Now that’s saying something significant.

How do we get our students thinking like this? First, there needs to be significant conversations around texts read in class--conversations that focus on the literary devices used but more importantly their purpose or function in the text. Students then need to write, write, and write some
more. I learned a good quick-write activity a few years ago during a professional night at the AP Lit reading. In this quick-write, students identify a literary device in a text by first writing a paragraph that gives the context for when/how that device is used within the text. Then they write another paragraph that analyzes its function or purpose. This is where the real analysis happens and students’ thinking about a text becomes more sophisticated.

In an analysis of the metaphor “My mother is a fish” from *As I Lay Dying*, one of my students wrote this paragraph:

*By making this comparison, Vardaman’s under-developed mind was learning to cope with humanity’s finite nature. Addie’s death was his first encounter with nonexistence and he was faced with his own looming fate of an eventual end. Vardaman had only ever encountered death in animals, which do not interact the same way as human beings. Vardaman realized that even humans must fall and are not as controlling as they believe themselves to be. He not only made his mother a fish to ease the shock of her death, but to also come to terms with his own demise. He must learn that he will perish individually; no one can save him from this end. By believing Jewel’s mom to be a horse and his own a fish, Vardaman was separating himself from his family while discovering that neither he nor his loved ones have any power over future events.*

Students need to recognize patterns within the text, and they need to have enough background knowledge (have done enough reading of various texts) to have insight into how the author is crafting their story so that they can construct meaning through the reading of that text. To be able to do this, they need the academic language of literary analysis.

If it is done right, the analysis will be sophisticated. And, when done well, our students will possess the confidence to engage in the discourse that surrounds the literary texts they read.

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