

Developing a Thesis for a Literary Analysis Paper

Basically, the thesis statements for all literary analysis papers follow this general formula:

Literary convention(s)[optional]	Author/Title	active verb ¹	the point you are making (focus/perspective/theme)
	“The Secret Lion” by Alberto Alvaro Rios ²	explores	how children use fantasy to cope with reality.
	“The Secret Lion” by Alberto Alvaro Rios ²	examines	the ways in which the narrator of the story and his friend are “victimized” by their society.
The point of view in	“The Secret Lion” by Alberto Alvaro Rios ²	reveals	both the perspective of the child as he deals with the inequalities in his life and the perspective of the adult narrator who looks back with anger on those lessons learned.
The theme of	“The Secret Lion” by Alberto Alvaro Rios ²	examines	the difficult lessons children learn as they grow up and things get taken away.
	In "The Hunter," E. L. Doctorow	weaves	setting, style, and characterization ³ together to create a tension of oppositions: setting and character, cold and warmth, death and life.
	In "St. Peter and the Angel," Denise Levertov	mirrors	one such instance [when that seemingly distant Divine Being crashes through our misconceptions and declares, "I AM GOD! I have always been here!" in] . . . the mystery of the release of Saint Peter, and the bigger mystery of the Christian life.
	In Joyce Carol Oates' "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" ²		Connie becomes an easy prey to sexual violence because of a flawed sense of her own self-worth.
The symbolism	in “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” by Joyce Carol Oates ²	suggests	a teenage world driven by sex, where females are sacrificed to masculine aggression and control.
	Joyce Carol Oates' “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” ²	reveals	the nature of a sexual predator, both literally and symbolically, in its description of Arnold Friend. ⁴
	Andrew Marvell’s “To His Coy Mistress” ²	develops	a carefully constructed argument where the speaker seeks to persuade his lady to surrender her virginity to him.
	Andrew Marvell’s “To His Coy Mistress” ²	argues	for sexual freedom in opposition to empty social proprieties (mores) restricting sexual activity.
	Andrew Marvell’s “To His Coy Mistress” ²	argues	against romantic or courtly views of love in favor of a more "honest" eroticism.

Literary convention(s)[optional]	Author/Title	active verb ¹	the point you are making (focus/perspective/theme)
	Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress" ²	reveals	the speaker's attempt to use the physical pleasures of sex to resist, ignore, or escape the empty reality of a lifeless eternity.
	Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress" ²	expresses	a cynical, self-centered view of life that sees the only escape from the despair of a lifeless eternity in the physical pleasures of sexual intimacy.
	Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress" ²	expresses	a cynical view of life through the use of hyperbole, sexual innuendo, and mocking humor. ³
	Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress" ²	argues	that life must be lived to its fullest because life is fleeting (carpe diem).
	"My Oedipus Complex" by Frank O'Connor, "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love" by Raymond Carver, and "Hunters in the Snow" by Tobias Wolff ⁵	examine	the conflicts that can erupt between individuals in close relationships and the consequences those conflicts can have on people's lives.
	"Boys and Girls" by Alice Munro and "The Things They Carried" by Tim O'Brien ⁵	explore	the struggles people have with the restrictions imposed on them by gender and the efforts they make to cope.

¹ Verbs like *reveals*, *explores*, *shows*, *examines*, *discusses*, *develops*, *investigates*, *describes*, *depicts*, *argues*, *expresses*, *criticizes*, *compares*, *illustrates*, *portrays*, and so on.

² These statements demonstrate how the same work is open to multiple interpretations.

³ Note in this example the literary conventions are worked into the point being made.

⁴ Notice that a thesis does not have to explain the whole work but can focus on a single aspect (in this case, one of the characters).

⁵ This example illustrates a thesis comparing multiple works.

The following thesis follows the same basic pattern but deals with multiple works and places the conventions after the list of titles:

"My Oedipus Complex" by Frank O'Connor, "Boys and Girls" by Alice Munro, "The Red Convertible" by Louise Erdrich, and "The Things They Carried" by Tim O'Brien each contains a central image that illustrates each story's theme, which defines the conflict faced by the main character(s).

The following thesis includes all the elements above but organizes and develops them in language that is more interesting:

In Mark Helprin's "North Light," the narrative point of view is interlaced with an atmosphere of tension like a drawn bowstring, woven back and forth between scene and exposition, between telling detail and significance.

Your introduction will provide any needed background for understanding your thesis such as definitions of literary conventions being explored (especially if those definitions are not standard or if a new view of these is being presented), examples or illustrations of the key idea being explored in this essay (the point you are making), or a discussion of other works by the author and how this story fits in or relates to the author's life and/or work.