What is a Critical Chapter Analysis and How do I Write One?

IMPORTANT NOTE: An analysis is not a summary! An analysis involves using specific evidence from the text and explaining how it relates to a particular theme of what you’re reading. It also involves explaining the author's purpose for using specific elements of literature.

Step 1: Read the chapter and annotate. "But wait," you protest. "I’ve already read the chapter. Now you want me to do it again?" YES. This time, read the chapter with a critical eye. Highlight and mark things you feel are important. Annotate! (See our class “Handouts” and “Bookmarks” links)

Step 2: Create a thesis statement. Your thesis statement must contain a subject and an opinion. The subject is the chapter you’re analyzing. Your opinion must contain how the chapter contributes to the overall theme of the work or what the author's purpose is in using certain literary devices. Your thesis is your “guiding light” and the most important part of your paper. Work on it and make sure that through it, you have given yourself plenty of clear and compelling directions to work with—just enough and not too many. Remember the “3 point thesis?” The resources on our course page will help refresh your memory regarding thesis development. Also, please see me for a “fifteen minute tutorial” on how to construct a strong and clear thesis!

Here are some examples:

Chapter 4 of The Chocolate War by Robert Cormier uses an ironic relationship between Trinity High School's most feared teacher and Trinity High School's most disobedient student to foreshadow the imminent destruction of all that is good at the school.

The final chapter in J.K. Rowling’s Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows firmly establishes Harry as a Messianic figure and a symbol of hope in a world of darkness.

Chapter 5 of John Steinbeck’s Of Mice and Men resolves the novel's main conflict--the individual vs. society--with society crushing the individual.

Now that you have some examples, consider some literary terms you may wish to address: metaphor, simile, imagery, inference, point of view, irony, simile, hyperbole, etc. How do they impact the interpretation of the chapter? How do they enhance the author’s message? What is the author’s overall message, her literary “thesis”? Is there a lesson to be learned? How is she/he manipulating the reader through these literary devices?

Once you've written thesis statement, you can begin the outline. Plan Your Success with an Outline! Learning how to write a good chapter analysis means learning how to write a good outline.

Step 3: Make an outline - "But wait," you protest. "You want me to write an outline? I just want to get this thing done." Once again, you want to write a good analysis, right? Here are the steps to making a good outline. We'll assume the outline is for a multi-paragraph essay---which it is.
I. Your thesis statement goes here. For the sake of this example, we'll use the one above from *The Chocolate War*.

A. Write a topic sentence for your first body paragraph here. Your topic sentence must support your thesis statement. If you don't know how to write a specific topic sentence, now would be a good time to find out. Example: Brother Leon's association with the Vigils undermines his ability to provide a safe environment for his students.

1. Write your first piece of evidence here. Your evidence, by the way, comes from the chapter. It can be a direct quotation, a specific fact, or a brief summary. Don't bog the reader down with unnecessarily long quotes or useless facts. Example: Brother Leon gives tacit approval and open support for the most dangerous student organization at his school in return for their support of the annual chocolate sale.

   a. Give an explanation of how your fact supports the topic sentence. This explanation can be an opinion, insight, interpretation, analysis (it's a good idea to have analysis in your analysis paper), analogy, or anecdote. Example: This would be the equivalent of a high school principal enlisting the help of the neighborhood Bloods or Crips to ensure attendance at the school's choir concert.

   b. Continue your explanation or provide an additional related explanation. Example: This new alliance will eventually yield tragic results.

2. Write your second piece of evidence here. Example: Brother Leon claims the importance of the chocolate sale is to keep the school afloat financially.

   a. Provide an explanation for fact #2. Example: If Brother Leon truly cared about the school, he would not lend his support to the school's most malicious organization.

   b. Continue your explanation or provide an additional related explanation. Example: Most likely, Brother Leon will receive a personal financial benefit from the sale of the chocolates.

3. Write a concluding sentence here that transition into the next paragraph. Example: Brother Leon thinks he's manipulating Archie, but the reader knows otherwise.

B. Here would be the topic sentence of your second body paragraph. Judging by the concluding sentence of your first body paragraph, this paragraph will treat Archie's ability as a leader and manipulator and its likely potential for tragedy. This paragraph and each succeeding paragraph will follow the same exact pattern as the first body paragraph.

The more thorough your outline, the easier it will be to write your analysis. Now that your outline is complete, it's time to write.
Wynn—adapted from Trent Lorcher/Ronda Bowen “Writing a Chapter Analysis”

Step 5: Write the First Draft - If you wrote a good outline, this part is easy. Begin with an attention grabber in the introduction. Your best bet here would be to provide a brief summary of the chapter on which you're writing—a couple of sentences should be sufficient—followed by your already written thesis statement (Your thesis statement should be the last sentence of your introduction). Your body paragraphs are practically written already. Add transitions for fluency. Reword, if necessary. Add words for clarity. Subtract words, if possible (just because it's in the outline doesn't mean it has to be in your paper).

Step 6: Edit and Revise - Proofread for grammar and punctuation errors. Other things to check when revising include:

- Making sure you haven't written a summary.
- Making sure what you wrote makes sense.
- Making sure your body paragraphs support your thesis statement.

The final instructions involve:

- Having a peer or writing tutor read your work
- Being “open” and non-defensive regarding suggested changes
- Reading your work aloud to yourself (you would be shocked at what you can detect yourself by reading your papers out loud.
- Check the “check-list” again—i.e., Did you summarize? (naughty, naughty)
- Do your best and use the grade you receive as an encouraging sign that you were close to perfect even if you were near failure. Keep trying and maintain a good attitude.