



List of Writing Prompts

For students:

There are three prompts below each with four texts. For your literary analysis essay, choose ONE prompt and text pairing that interests you. Then, take a look at the guiding questions for the text you choose. You don't necessarily need to answer all of these questions in your paper. The questions are there to help get you thinking in a direction that will be more likely to lead you to a successful literary analysis.

PROMPT 1.

Write an analysis of a key character in a literary work. Focus on two or three key actions of that character. Discuss the character's motivations and decisions in terms you can support with clear evidence from a critical reading of the text. Consider whether this character's actions fit together or contradict each other. You may also want to consider whether or not any other characters in the story are aware of this conflict, and if so, how they influence the character you are writing about.

Literary Works (choose **one**):

["Interpreter of Maladies"](#) (Jhumpa Lahiri, 1999)

Guiding Questions:

1. How does a new outsider community member like Mrs. Das influence Mr. Kapasi, who seems to have become bored with his life and his role in the community?
2. How does Mr. Kapasi's desire for Mrs. Das make him unable to understand Mrs. Das' desires, leading to his failure to fulfill his role as the Interpreter of Maladies?
3. How do the Das family's actions surrounding their children show that their desires or interests do not accord with their obligations?

["What You Pawn, I Will Redeem"](#) (Sherman Alexie, 2003)

Guiding Questions:

1. How does the grandmother's property at the pawn shop help to define the narrator's desires and feeling of obligation to recover it? Why is it so important?
2. How does the character accomplish his objective, and how is this surprising considering all of the unfortunate events and bad decisions he makes along the way?
3. How do the other characters--the Aleuts, the pawn shop owner, the waitress, the police officer, the other Indians at the bar--each play an important role in showing how the

narrator is committed to an important mission he is worthy of completing?

["We Came All the Way from Cuba so You Could Dress Like This?"](#) (Achy Obejas, 1994)

Guiding questions:

1. To what conflicts does the title allude (social? Political? Cultural? others?)?
2. The first-person narrator switches tenses (from present to future). How does this create tension in the story?
3. How is the narrator's internal conflict ("man v. self") merely an internalization of political, familial, and social conflict?

"The Things They Carried" (Tim O'Brien, 1990) - 5.4 in [*Journey into Literature*](#)

Guiding Questions:

1. The second paragraph of the story begins, "The things they carried were largely determined by necessity" (O'Brien, 1990). Were the soldiers truly able to carry everything they needed? What needs were left unfulfilled by these items, and what in the story suggests this?
2. The narrator also lists specific items that each man carried. How do these items symbolize the emotions that they carried with them, and how does this understanding enrich our understanding of the characters?
3. Often a comparative analysis can help us to notice elements of a story that we might not otherwise notice. Choose two or three characters and compare the things they carried. How does this comparison help qualities of each come to the surface?

PROMPT 2.

In some stories, characters come into conflict with the culture in which they live. Often, a character feels alienated in his/her community or society due to race, gender, class or ethnic background. The texts below all contain a character who is 'outcast' or otherwise disconnected from society in some way, reflecting important ideas about both the character and the surrounding society's assumptions, morality, and values. Choose a text and consider the questions below as you critically read the text. Then, craft a working thesis that suggests *how* this alienation is expressed in the text and why it is significant.

Literary Works (choose **one**):

["What You Pawn, I Will Redeem"](#) (Sherman Alexie, 2003)

Guiding Questions:

1. What beliefs and values from Native American culture does the narrator consider important, based on ideas and actions in the story?
2. What kinds of experience and values do characters share across cultural differences like Native Americans and whites, or even between different native groups in the story?

3. How do the bisexual character, the narrator, and the homeless characters in the story all demonstrate and resolve different “outsider” identities?

[“A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings”](#) (Gabriel García Marquez, 1955)

Guiding Questions:

1. How is the supernatural made familiar and the familiar defamiliarized in the story? Is the angel made more human? Are humans made supernatural or less humane?
2. How is the tension between supernatural and human resolved (or not) in the story?
3. What does the community’s treatment of this ‘outsider’ reveal about its culture, values, and beliefs?

“A Hunger Artist” (Franz Kafka, 1924) – 7.5 in [*Journey into Literature*](#)

Guiding Questions:

1. What is the “hunger artist’s” art, and how does it challenge the understanding of the men who look after the artist as well as the audience that ignores him?
2. Why does the artist have to explain so much about his “art” throughout the story-- is he explaining it for others to understand or as part of his own self-definition?
3. How does the young panther capture the audience’s attention so easily yet they ignore the artist-- what does this say about “appreciating” what others value?

[“Everyday Use”](#) (Alice Walker, 1973)

Guiding Questions:

1. How do we know that the protagonist is impoverished? Is she content with her class? Why or why not?
2. How do we know that she is African-American? How does her alienation due to her race also connect with her education?
3. The protagonist’s daughter, Dee, who has embraced her African roots, accuses her mother of not understanding her heritage. Why? What is the situational irony at the end of the story?

PROMPT 3.

Consider the role of setting, or context, in one of the works. For example, a story that takes place in a wild and natural setting might include characters struggling against nature to survive. A story set in a city might include themes of alienation and anonymity because of the impersonal crowds and busy city life. Cultural contexts can combine with both urban and rural elements to produce further meaning, as well. Consider the following questions as you critically read one of the texts below: Does the protagonist conflict with the setting or have particular interactions with it? Does the protagonist’s relationship with the setting connect with his/her development as a character? Does the setting reveal other themes and conflicts?

Literary Works (choose **one** from any of the lists below):

[“The Man of the Crowd”](#) (Edgar Allan Poe, 1845)

Guiding Questions:

1. How does the city setting--busy streets, buildings with specific purposes, dark backstreets-- produce a disorienting and confining experience for people in the story?
2. How do all of the different occupations and “types” of workers in the city combine to communicate that no one is an individual person and no one really knows each other?
3. What sorts of problems do the narrator and some of the other characters have as a result of this alienating city life? (Think of the narrator’s obsession with the man.)

“The Things They Carried” (O’Brien, 1990) - 5.4 in [Journey into Literature](#)

Guiding Questions:

1. How does the story communicate the uncertain and frightening setting these soldier-characters experience? (Consider repeated phrases or other devices.)
2. What sorts of emotions, such as stress or fear, does the Vietnam context cause the characters to experience? Give specific examples from the story, and consider how these emotions might be “told” to us in multiple ways.
3. How do the soldiers in the story cope with their setting/context, whether through imagined escapes or other means, and are they successful?

“A Worn Path” (Eudora Welty, 1941) – 5.3 in [Journey into Literature](#)

Guiding Questions:

1. Clugston suggests that “[t]he setting in this story is in a particular season -- the Christmas season.” Why is this significant considering the plot?
2. Clugston (2011) further writes: “The physical setting changes during Phoenix Jackson's journey. How does each environment she encounters reflect her character?”
3. Phoenix Jackson encounters many obstacles on her journey. To what non-physical challenges do they allude?

[“Sonny’s Blues”](#) (James Baldwin, 1957)

Guiding Questions:

1. How do the characters’ interactions with the multi-faceted “local color” and communities of Harlem articulate the differences between those characters?
2. What does the story suggest about a neighborhood’s cultural identity and the diverse life experiences possible, even when people seem to come from the same place?
3. What aspects of the setting (the neighborhood, the school, etc.) could be characterized as liberating or oppressive, and how is this reflected in the characters?