

Short Story Passage Analysis

LRJ #2 (Short Stories)

Having already completed your SIFT, the SIFT presentation, and the LRJ on “experience, interpretation, and evaluation,” should help you complete this next part. So far, you’ve focused on the story in its entirety. Now you will focus on one significant passage from that story.

STEP ONE: Carefully choose the passage

First choose one passage that you find key to a specific meaning or message of the overall text, or choose several short passages that are significant for understanding a key symbol, image, character or theme from the text. It may be the passage from which you chose your “significant quote” for your SIFT presentation. Or it may be a passage that seems to raise a question, or seems intentionally ambiguous and open to interpretation. Your SIFT and your SIFT presentation should give you a pretty good idea of which passages will work best.

Be sure to choose a passage (or a symbol, an image, or a motif that might be mentioned in a few passages) that you think is rich in meaning, important to the overall story, and that you understand and can discuss clearly.

While you want your passage or image to be “thick” (complex, symbolic, significant), you don’t want to choose something too long, too complex, or too overwhelming, because you only have a two to three pages in your LRJ in which to unfold and discuss all possible or important associations and meanings of it.

A rule of thumb is to try to focus in on just one significant passage (a paragraph or even part of a paragraph, say), or two or three short, key references to the image or character you will discuss. For each sentence of text that you quote, you should be able to discuss it for at least a paragraph of your own writing.

STEP TWO: Write out the passage in your LRJ

Before you begin your passage analysis, write out the passage you’re choosing. This should be no longer than half a page in your LRJ, single-spaced.

STEP THREE: Your passage analysis should focus on “interpretation”

Your discussion should *interpret* the text, whether your analysis is focusing on an image, a motif, a character, the language, or the meaning. To interpret you need to jump off the track of chronological sequence (plot synopsis) — one thing after another—and consider the meaning of particular events or images, etc.

N.B. Please see the sample passage analysis from Frankenstein, available at the website in the “How To” section

Rules of Thumb for Passage Analysis

- Do not summarize, repeat, or paraphrase what the passage or the tale is about.
- Let the text be your guide, your marker, to which your discussion should return again and again. When in doubt, go back to the text.
- In your discussion of the passage or passages, **spell out each step in your thinking process** that caused you to come up with the interpretation you offer. Many students make a common mistake of jumping too quickly to conclusions without demonstrating what caused them to make such a conclusion. We cannot and will not guess what you are thinking or assume you meant to say something unless you spell it all out. What might seem evident and obvious to you might not seem obvious to your reader. Don’t neglect to

write down exactly why the specific words and phrases from the text led you to think about it as you do. Make all the connections in your own thinking clear. Be clear and complete. This might involve some self-reflection.

- Refer back to the specific parts of the passage as you discuss or analyze each element of it (quote that part again) and show how each part (or even specific words) leads you to a new level or insight in your own understanding and discussion of it.
- One way to check if your analysis is on track is to compare it to the overall work and its other themes, images, and overall message that you uncovered through your SIFT. If much other evidence supports your interpretation, and what you propose it means is consistent with many other aspects of the text, then it is most likely a reasonable, persuasive interpretation.
- You don't have to come up with the same interpretation as an expert; you just have to make sure that you have LOTS of persuasive support for whatever interpretation you offer.