FOR THE
IB DIPLOMA

Literary Analysis for English Literature

Skills for Success

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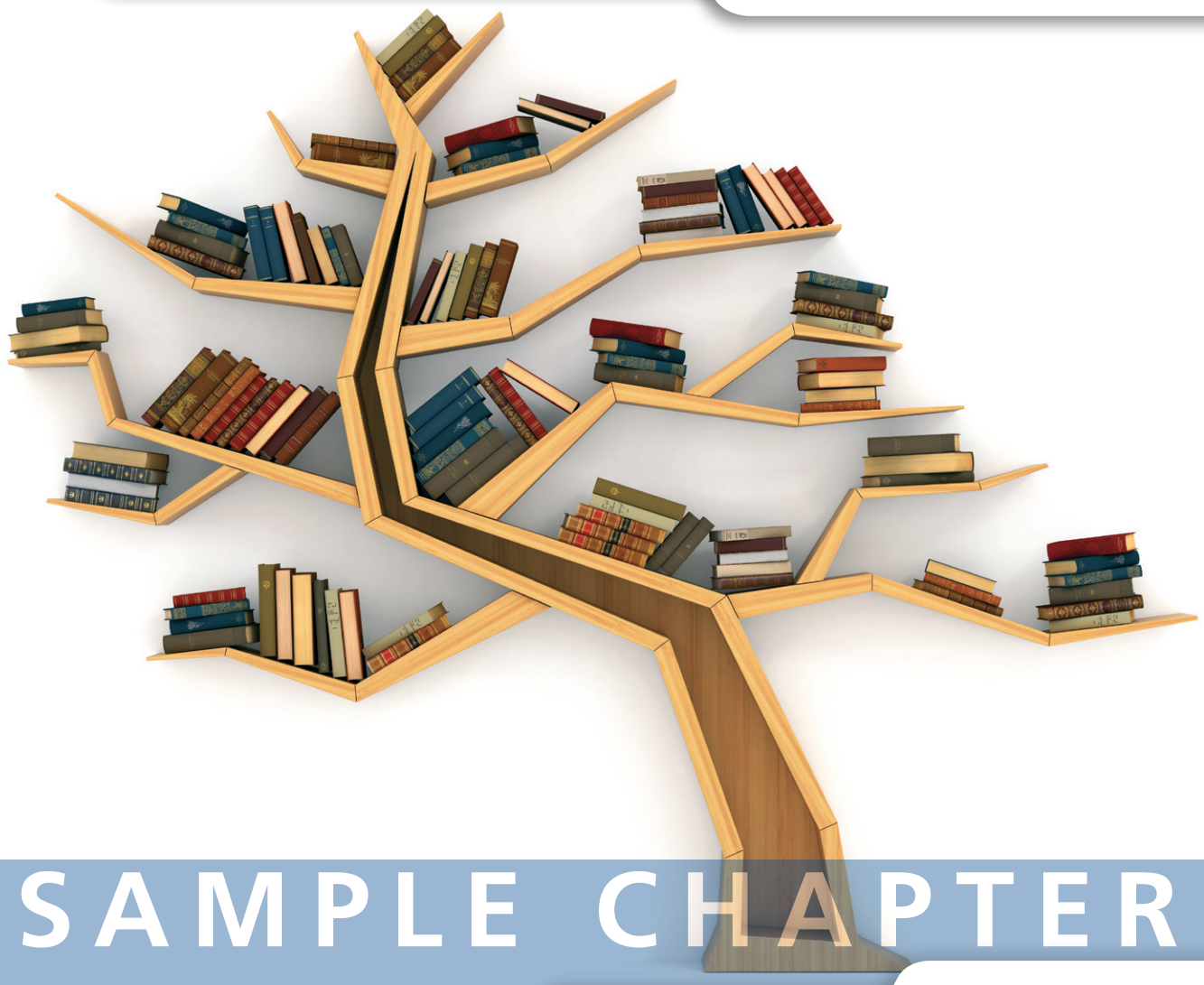

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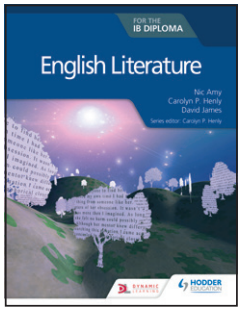

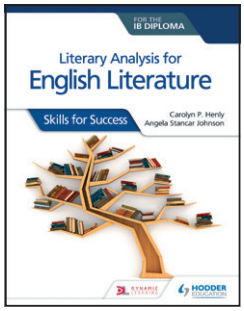

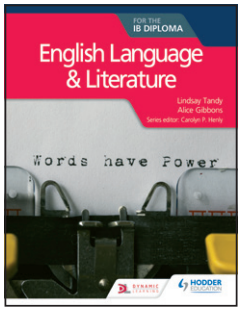

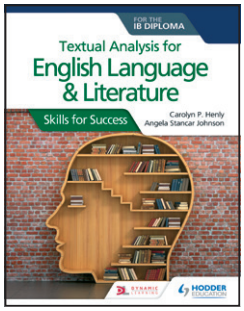

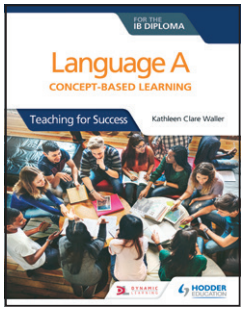

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Title	ISBN	Price	Pub date
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5 Writing about literature

Summary vs. analysis

One of the most important things for you to master in order to write about literature is the difference between summary and analysis. While you will need to provide a certain amount of summary to provide context for your analysis, it will be the analysis which must be the focus of your work.

A summary is a description of a text which consists of a retelling of the story. In a summary, there is little to no sense of your voice as a critic; you are merely regurgitating an author's ideas.

An analysis, on the other hand, is an investigation into the elements of a literary work. In an analysis, you are performing the role of literary critic and examining aspects of the work in close detail in order to reach a conclusion. An analysis will have to include a carefully chosen and limited summary, along with quotations, to set the context for your analysis, and to support your thesis or line of argument, but the main focus must be an interpretation of how the aspects of the text you have chosen to write about contribute to the text as a whole.

If you are familiar with Bloom's Taxonomy, you will know that summary sits at the bottom level of the pyramid: *remember*. Analysis involves the higher order thinking skills that are found at the top of the pyramid: *understand*, *apply*, *analyse*, *evaluate*, and *create*.

You will not be able to demonstrate beyond a superficial level of understanding if you merely summarise a text. In order to demonstrate *appreciation* for a text you will need to dig deeper and really consider the effects of the tools that the writer has used.

ACTIVITY: SUMMARY VS ANALYSIS

Read the following extract from *The Whistling Season* by Ivan Doig, and then examine the responses below. Notice the difference between the summary and the analysis. Consider what characterises each response.

This jilted old house and all that it holds, even empty. If I have learned anything in a lifetime spent overseeing schools, it is that childhood is the one story that stands by itself in every soul. As surely as a compass needle knows north, that is what draws me to these remindful rooms as if the answer I need by the end of this day is written in the dust that carpets them.

The wrinkled calendar on the parlor wall stops me in my tracks. It of course has not changed since my last time here. Nineteen fifty-two. Five years, so quickly passed, since the Marias Coulee school board begged the vacant old place from me for a month while they repaired the roof of their teacherage and I had to come out from the department in Helena to go over matters with them. What I am startled to see is that the leaf showing on the calendar—October—somehow stays right across all the years: that 1909 evening of *Paul, get out your good pen and paper*, the lonely teacher's tacking up of something to relieve these bare walls so long after that, and my visit now under such a changed sky of history.

The slyness of calendars should not surprise me, I suppose. Passing the newly painted one-room school, our school, this morning as I drove out in my state government car, all at once I was again at that juncture of time when Damon and Toby and I, each in our turn, first began to be aware that we were not quite of our own making, and yet did not seem to be simply rewarmed 'tovers of our elders, either. How could I, who back there at barely thirteen, realized that I must struggle awake every morning of my life before anyone else in the house to wrest myself from the grip of my tenacious dreams, be the offspring of a man who slept solidly as a railroad tie?

20 And Damon, fists-up Damon, how could he derive from our peaceable mother? Ready or not, we were being introduced to ourselves, sometimes in a fashion as hard to follow as our father's reading finger. Almost any day in the way stations of childhood we passed back and forth between, prairie homestead and country school, was apt to turn into a fresh puzzle piece of life. Something I find true even yet.

Summary:

The narrator returns to his childhood home, which has been empty for a number of years, and he describes what he sees there. He notices that the calendar is set to October 1952, five years before. He reminisces about how he felt when he was a child, and he ponders the way in which children find out about who they are as people, different from their parents.

Analysis:

The calendar in this passage serves as a symbol for time and the way in which our sense of time and change is the result of the way in which we remember events and find connections among them. In this case, the narrator shows how the calendar, which is set to October 1952 (lines 6 & 9), causes him to remember an important October day from 1909 (line 10). Since the time in which he is speaking is October 1957 (lines 6 & 10), he uses the alignment of these three Octobers to signify a connection among them.

We know that the narrator has some decision to make on this day (lines 3 & 4), and we see that he himself sees the calendar page with its reference to October as a sign that the answers he needs today will be found in his memories of the past. We don't know, from this passage, what decision it is that Paul has to make; however, we can surmise, because the narrator chose to speak of memories from the past which have to do with figuring out who we are as people, that whatever the decision is it is a very important one that has implications for who Paul will become.

Finally, the narrator gives us the image of traveling back and forth between homestead and school, and we see that in his mind, that journey has become a metaphor for grappling with life's difficulties. He tells us that any such journey, 'was apt to turn into a fresh puzzle piece of life...' In the present day, Paul has made a journey here from Helena (line 8), and by using the reference to the significance of his childhood journeys he connects the present to the past and elevates the significance of his present day journey. We are alerted to wait for the revelation that whatever decision he has to make is a big one with widespread and/or lasting ramifications.

Summary vs. analysis in the sample passage

Note that the summary is quite a bit shorter than the original (409 words in the extract and 67 words in the summary), but that it includes mention of all the major events/elements of the passage. This would be too much summary to use in an essay focused on a particular topic relative to the passage. Note also that the analysis, although it is much longer than the summary (319 words) does not include everything that could have been said about what this passage means or what it says. The writer of the analysis had to choose important elements, and so chose to focus on the symbol of the calendar and how it stood for the connection of events from past and present. You will never have time to write about everything you notice in a passage or work. Finally, notice the verbs used in the summary: 'returns,' 'describes,' 'notices,' 'reminisces,' and 'ponders.' These are all things

that the narrator does. This is typical of a summary: when summarising, you describe what the narrator and/or characters *do* in the passage. That is very different from what you will do in the analysis.

Here are some of the verbs from the analysis: 'serves as a symbol'; 'shows how the calendar…causes…'; 'uses the alignment…to signify…'; 'narrator chose to speak of…' And so on. All of these verbs describe what the narrator is doing in terms of shaping his telling of the story. Summary focuses on actions in the dramatic moment; analysis focuses on construction of stories.

Sidelight: Dramatic situation vs. narrative situation

In any text with a narrator, the reader must deal with two different situations: the dramatic situation and the narrative situation. The dramatic situation is the actions of the story occurring, while the narrative situation is the narrator telling the story. Sometimes there is a big difference between the two. Think of the extract from *The Good Soldier*, by Ford Madox Ford, in chapter 3: that also has a first-person narrator and, in that novel, the narrator actually describes his writing situation for the reader. He tells the reader that he is writing the novel twelve years after the earliest events that he describes, he writes for six months, and then he picks up the tale again three years later.

Sometimes, as with this passage from *The Whistling Season*, there is very little time between an event happening and the telling of it. Here we see a scene in which the narrator is actually standing in the house talking as he observes the space around him. There is almost no difference at all between the narrative situation and the dramatic situation. Toward the end of the passage, however, he thinks back to events that occurred many years before – 48 years earlier, to be exact. When he does that, there is, of course, a distance between the dramatic situation (the events that happened when he and his brothers were children) and the telling, which happens on one day in 1957.

Summary, then, is the description of the events of the dramatic situation. Analysis is the reader's observation of how the narrator is telling the story, the identification of the various elements of that story-telling process, and the explanation of how those elements create meaning.

Sidelight: Author vs. narrator

One decision you will always have to make when writing about literature is whether you are writing about what the *author* does or what the *narrator* or *speaker* does. This decision always poses an interesting problem, because, of course, the author creates the narrator. In that sense it is fair to say that everything the narrator does is something that the author made him or her do.

In making your decision, then, you will need to carefully consider where you want to focus your attention. Here are some important considerations:

- If you have a third-person narrator, it is not particularly interesting to consider what the narrator is doing, because the narrator is not a character in the story, and so his or her actions and attitudes do not influence the story. In that case, focus on what the author is doing to create the effects you have noticed.
- If, on the other hand, you have a first-person narrator who is a character in the story, then you have someone whose actions and attitudes are influential, and it is definitely important to consider how.
- If, furthermore, you have a **reliable first-person narrator** (refer back to chapter 3 for the difference between a reliable narrator and an unreliable one), then you don't

have to worry too much about how the narrator's efforts to tell the story differ from the author's, and you can safely choose to discuss either the author's strategies or the narrator's.

- If, however, you have an **unreliable first-person narrator**, then you definitely need to show that you understand that fact. You will need to demonstrate that you understand what the narrator is up to, and that you also understand how the narrator's strategies effectively misrepresent reality, and to what extent. In a full-length essay, you would also want, eventually, to address the question of why the author created such a narrator. You would need to show, in other words, how the author's values, attitudes and understanding of the world contrast with those of the narrator.

In the analysis of the passage from *The Whistling Season*, the writer focused on the narrator's strategies. This is correct because the story is about a decision that the narrator has to make, and so the narrator is not only constructing that story, but is the main character in that story too. Showing that you understand how the telling of the story relates to the decision he will make also shows that you understand how the author is creating meaning.

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About the authors

Carolyn and **Angela** also authored *Textual Analysis for English Literature for the IB Diploma: Skills for Success* (Hodder, 2019).

Carolyn P. Henly (A.B. M.Ed, National Board Certification 2001, 2011) has recently retired after 33 years of teaching, 20 of those in the International Baccalaureate Programme. She has taught English HL, Theory of Knowledge, and IB Philosophy. She has served in a number of roles in the IB, including coordinator, examiner (both TOK and English), workshop leader, President of the Mid-Atlantic subregional organization, and member of two TOK curriculum review committees. She co-authored the third edition of the *Theory of Knowledge textbook*, also for Hodder.

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