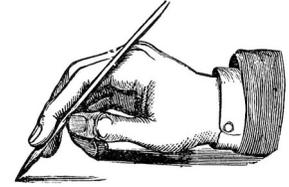




## Writing Effectively about Literature

We read and write about literature to develop finer critical reading skills and to deepen our understanding of our common humanity. Writing about literature always involves the act of interpretation. Analysts must pay close attention to the language used in texts to uncover the ideas the author is trying to communicate in a text. The **theme** of a work refers to the ideas a writer communicates to readers through literary language. To create theme, writers use an array of literary tools such as: imagery, diction, word choice, point of view, metaphor, conflict, symbolism, organization, character development, humor and many more. Following a simple process of critical reading can help you discover the rich meaning of any literary text.



### When analyzing a work of literature, follow these steps:

#### Read carefully and take your time.

Let the piece wash over you. It takes time to coax the meaning from a poem or story. Engage in close, repeated active reading of important passages.

**Annotate the text.** Write down **any** idea that pops into your head. Don't judge the idea; just write it down. Note the use of imagery, or symbols, intriguing passages, word choice, etc. What subject(s) is the writer exploring? What are some of the ideas at play? Draw connections between different parts of the text, and to ideas, people, and events, other texts from outside the text.

*1st person narrator*  
*use of imagery*  
*Jack not happy in marriage*

**No One's a Mystery by Elizabeth Tallent**

For my eighteenth birthday Jack gave me a five-year diary with a latch and a little key, light as a dime. I was sitting beside him scratching at the lock, which didn't seem to want to work, when he thought he saw his wife's Cadillac in the distance, coming toward us. He pushed me down onto the dirty floor of the pickup and kept one hand on my head while I inhaled the musk of his cigarettes in the dashboard ashtray and sang along with Rosanne Cash on the tape deck. We'd been drinking tequila and the bottle was between his legs, resting up against his crotch, where the seam of his Levi's was bleached linen-white, though the Levi's were nearly new. I don't know why his Levi's always bleached like that, along the seams and at the knees. In a curve of cloth his zipper glinted gold. *sexual image?*

"It's her," he said. "She keeps the lights on in the daytime. I can't think of a single habit in a woman that irritates me more than that." When he saw that I was going to stay still he took his hand from my head and ran it through his own dark hair.

"Why does she?" I said.  
"She thinks it's safer. Why does she need to be safer? She's driving exactly fifty-five miles an hour. She believes in those signs:

*what's meaning of title? sounds depressing*  
*simile*  
*cheating/violent/sexual image*  
*use of dialogue to build meaning*  
*\* easy to read - simple, everyday diction*

**Free write initial thoughts.** Next, free write on the work: for 15 minutes write every single thought that comes to mind regarding the text. Do not stop writing/typing until the 15 minutes is up. Don't censor any idea. The point here is to circumvent the many filters your mind employs to control information and to free up the countless ideas that exist behind these filters. At this point, we are just developing a pool possibilities to explore. For more information on prewriting, visit our resource [here](#).

**Pose questions.** As you read and annotate and after you have completed your free write, pose questions: What is the subject(s) of this piece? What is the writer saying about the subject? What evidence from the text leads you to this idea?

**Develop a theory.** What conclusions might you draw from your analysis of the text? Test this theory against the evidence. Do you have *enough* evidence from the text itself to support your theory? If you do not have substantial evidence to support your theory, revise your theory.

**Draft your essay.** Now you are in a more informed place to begin drafting your essay. Use your notes, your free write, and your annotations to help develop a focus and content for your essay.



## Model Literary Analysis of a Short Story

In the short story “No One’s a Mystery,” Elizabeth Tallent explores the ideas of how difficult it is for people to connect with one another once a sense of boredom and apathy takes hold. The story is about a married man who is having an affair with an 18-year-old girl, who narrates the story. The story is static, taking place in one setting – the cab of Jack’s pick-up truck. At first, the story appears to be a condemnation of male infidelity and the now clichéd scenario of an older man trading in his middle aged wife for a younger, more beautiful woman. The story could also be seen as an indictment of how men tend to exploit the naiveté of teenage girls for their own selfish pleasures. Yet, the title of the story, along with a number of other textual clues, suggests Tallent is after something quite different. The title of the story, for instance, “No One’s a Mystery,” suggests a world-weariness that we come to see is associated with Jack. Lack of mystery in life corresponds to a lack of interest in what life has to offer. Furthermore, Tallent seems to suggest that as we get older, we learn too much about people and, growing cynical, can no longer remain interested in the people we once were so charmed by. And losing our interest, we begin to have difficulty maintaining our emotional attachment to our husbands, wives or lovers. **Tallent’s central theme is that people need mystery, excitement in order to remain attached to one another, and, as we get older, our ability to find mystery in those we love grows increasingly difficult due to the cumulative effect of the pain and loss we experience through time, and consequently, our ability to stay authentically attached does as well.** We see this with Jack, how he has first lost interest in his wife and is now losing interest in his 18-year-old lover. This loss of interest brings loss of connection and Jack is suffering for it. The 18-year-old narrator has not lost her sense of mystery and therefore is emotionally devoted to Jack, but we get the feeling that she is about to. Proof of their different perspectives lies in the predictions of what the narrator will write in her new diary. From her innocent perspective, the world of mystery, she feels hope and love and connection; however, from his experienced perspective, the world of no mystery, Jack can no longer feel hope or authentic love and connection. Jack seeks to address this loss with regular affairs with younger and younger women, to replenish his spirit through the physical act of sex.



### Final Note:

Patience and persistence are key when writing about literature. Deepening your understanding of a literary work takes time — for *everyone*. Don’t doubt your abilities because you do **not** hit gold right away. Instead use the Writing Process to help push thinking forward and sift through possible interpretations to develop the best possible analytical essay.

**Further Assistance:** This resource is available at [lewisuwritingcenter.wordpress.com](http://lewisuwritingcenter.wordpress.com). For more detailed help or if you have questions, visit the Writing Center located in the Lewis University Library or call 815-836-5427.

**Sources Consulted:** Purdue OWL; *How to Read Literature Like a Professor*, Thomas C. Foster.