**Interpretive Essay Lesson Plan: How to Write a Literary Analysis**

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**Common Pitfalls of Literary Analysis**

Following are the most common errors with literary analysis:

1. Writing a Summary: No matter how many times you emphasize that you do not want a summary, you'll still get them. The only way to eliminate this error is to [model analysis](http://www.brighthub.com/education/k-12/articles/28774.aspx) and give really low grades to students who summarize rather than analyze.
2. Listing Facts: A close relative of the summary is listing facts. It's also called the, "I'll list as many facts as I can about this literary work and hope the teacher doesn't grade it very closely" syndrome. Explain that listing facts without explaining how the fact supports the thesis statement or why that fact is important is useless.
3. Having No Evidence: At the other end of the bad analysis spectrum is the no evidence analysis. It consists of nothing but conjecture.

**How to Write an Interpretive Essay: The Basics**

Use the following guidelines for teaching how to write an interpretive essay or how to write a literary analysis:

* The introduction must introduce the literary work, capture the reader's attention, and include a clearly written thesis statement that contains the literary interpretation.
* The body of the essay must support the thesis statement through evidence--facts, examples, summaries--and commentary--opinions, analysis, interpretation, insight.
* The conclusion summarizes the interpretation and allows the writer to draw attention to the most important aspects of the analysis.

An 'A' essay does the following:

* identifies the author, title, and gives a brief summary of the literary work.
* provides a clear interpretation of the author's message and purpose.
* provides details, quotations, and other evidence to support the interpretation.

**Getting comfortable with timed essays**

My mind raced as I stared at the blank page in front of me. I raised my hand, "Mr. Pontoon, I'm feeling sick. Can I go to the nurse?

"No," he replied abruptly.

"Darn!" I thought, "I just wasted 15 seconds with that ploy, and still my paper is blank. I know- maybe I'll pee my pants. That'll get me out of this timed essay writing assignment." I leaned back, grunted and let her rip. I waited for a puddle to collect underneath my chair and raised my hand again, "Excuse me, Mr. Pontoon, I just urinated."

"Well, finish your writing, and I'll let you go change," he countered without flinching. He was obviously used to these tactics. Two more minutes had passed. The page was still blank. My thighs were chaffing. I smelled like urine. Luckily, I remembered the gun I brought with me to school that day. That would get me out of this assignment-

Beep! Beep! Beep! I woke up sweating, covered in soiled sheets. It was just a dream, but I knew right then I better find a way to get comfortable with timed essays or my life would be ruined. During lunch that day, I strolled nervously down to room 232 and sought advice from the guru of timed essays himself, Mr. Maven.

He began with a philosophical bit about how the skills for successfully writing timed essays coincided with the same skills needed to be successful in life. "Time management is essential!" he pleaded, "the great ones, the achievers, the pioneers all know how to manage their time!"

"What do you mean, Mr. Maven?"

"They have a plan and they follow it. They don't just go haphazardly about their work. What's your plan when writing a timed essay?" I think my dumbfounded look showed I had no idea what he was talking about. He continued, "Look here Sonny, if you don't have a plan, you're going to feel stressed, and the more stressed you feel, the more time you waste, the more time you waste, the more stressed you feel, the more stressed you feel the more-"

"OK, I get the point. Can you help me develop a plan?"

"First, read the question carefully. Determine what type of essay you need to write. Most often, timed tests are asking for a persuasive essay or a narrative essay. Sometimes you will be asked to explain a process, make a comparison, or give a description."

"So I don't just start writing immediately?" I questioned, feeling uneasy about the thought of wasting precious writing time.

Maven interrupted my thoughts, "Make sure you allot a certain amount of time for brainstorming, outlining, and organizing-"

I interjected, "Excuse me, Mr. Maven. It's timed. Why would I waste time making an outline?"

He shook his head, looked down, and sighed, "Because my boy, that five minutes you take preparing an outline will save you 10 times the minutes in writing. The outline allows you to create your essay in your mind before it's created on your paper. That's another trait of the great ones. They always see the creation before it's been created."

"Thanks, Mr. Maven. I'm starting to feel more comfortable now that I know how to plan my timed essay: I simply determine the type of essay to write, do some brainstorming, make an outline, and write until the time is up." I stood up and coolly started for the door. Mr. Maven shouted. I turned, startled, "What's wrong Mr. Maven?"

"You don't write til the end of the time! You must leave time for proofreading and editing!"

"But it's timed, Mr. Maven!" I continued as he shook his head in disgust, "I can write a lot during the five minutes that some people waste on proofreading and editing. The test graders want long essays, right?" I was beginning to lose confidence in my declaration as a tear began to form in Mr. Maven's eye.

"Son, let me ask you a simple question. Do you think a 1000 word essay riddled with spelling and grammar errors is better to turn in than an 800 word essay written correctly and clearly?" Maven folded his arms as I realized the full stupidity of my comment.

"OK," I said, "so I take 5-10 minutes brainstorming and outlining; I then write the essay and leave 5-10 minutes for proofreading and editing?" Mr. Maven looked pleased, so I continued, "Is there anything else I need to do to feel comfortable writing timed essays?"

"Well, actually knowing how to write comes in handy, and that can only come through practice," Maven smiled and wrapped up our discussion, "That's another characteristic of the great ones, practice and preparation. So I would recommend you come to class, listen to your writing teachers, and practice writing timed essays. When you practice, write with a purpose and focus on a specific aspect of writing you need to improve."

I shook Mr. Maven's hand and thanked him. From that point forward I felt completely comfortable writing timed essays.