

Building a Thesis

Any good piece of analytic critical writing presents and develops a *thesis* about one or more literary texts. Building a thesis is really not so very complex a task.

STEP ONE: Pick a word which adequately labels what the text is "about" or what the texts share. You are looking for a thematic word, not a descriptive one - in other words, "Novel" or "Tragedy" or "Cartoon" won't get you very far. But "denial" or "delusion" or "trust" will - if only as a starting point. So will even the tried and true - "love," "faith," "hope." But those make step two all the more important.

STEP TWO: In a sentence or two, define the word you have chosen as the text defines or uses it. You can start from a dictionary definition, but remember that many texts undertake the redefinition of words. So pay attention to what the word means in the text. If you can find a place where the text explicitly does this (yes, an actual quotation), all the better.

STEP THREE: In a few sentences, define precisely (and without empty summary) how the term you have chosen enters into the text(s) - how it/they raise, develop, and complicate that term

STEP FOUR: Point precisely to those locations in the text where the issue you have defined up to now emerges most directly and fully - not necessarily most clearly, since you are trying to lay out the critical work you mean to undertake.

NOW you are ready to write - your essay will demonstrate, through attention to specific words and images, how the theme you have defined governs the text(s) you are analyzing. The essay will focus on those moments in the text you have pointed out in STEP FOUR. What you have managed to do, already, is construct a sort of rough outline of your essay.

ALTERNATE ALGORITHM 1: THE JEOPARDY SYSTEM

Poems can be seen as complex considerations of difficult human questions. In the poem you are analyzing, what is the question at the heart of the poem, where precisely does it surface, and how does the poem grapple with it. Remember that poets, like professors, are obligated to ask questions, but not to answer them.

ALTERNATE ALGORITHM 2: ANGELA'S SYSTEM

What is the "theme" of the poem you are analyzing? As just above, at what points does the theme arise most explicitly, and most richly. Is there a pattern or process demonstrated by the sequence with which the poem addresses the theme?

THERE IS AN EVEN SIMPLER WAY TO FORMULATE THIS PROCESS: VERBALIZATION, DEFINITION, IMPLICATION, AND LOCATION. HOW SIMPLE IS THAT? NOT EVEN A TWELVE-STEP PROGRAM. INSTEAD, UNCLE HILDA'S HANDY FOUR STEP SYSTEM TO THE WRITING OF EFFECTIVE ANALYTIC PROSE.