

Chelsey J. Herrmann

Michigan State University

CEP 813

Analyzing Assessment Genre: Literary Analysis

### **Assessment**

The assessment genre upon which I will be focusing is the literary analysis essay. From my experience, this essay is typical of high school English classrooms and is usually administered at the end of a whole-class novel unit in which students have read and discussed the same work of literature. The essay tasks students with developing a critical thesis statement and supporting that thesis with evidence from the text. These essays can range in length but often extend beyond the traditional five-paragraph format. However, the basic structure of the five-paragraph essay is generally expected, with an introduction paragraph ending in the thesis, structured body paragraphs supporting that thesis, and a conclusion paragraph returning to the main idea.

Methods of assessing/evaluating the essay can differ. I have seen rubrics used in many cases, but some of my high school teachers would assign a holistic score, such as 92% A-. Written feedback is frequently included in the assessment process along with the final grade. Rubrics typically provide a variety of criteria, including some that refer to the content and some that refer to the writing. In this way, literary analysis essays are typically used to evaluate a student's understanding of the text *and* his or her writing ability. Many teachers use the writing process for these essays: students conduct brainstorming work, craft a rough draft, participate in self/peer revision, and submit a final draft. Sometimes these steps in the process are graded themselves, and teachers commonly offer feedback to students before the final draft is submitted through written comments and/or writing conferences. Since literary analysis essays typically conclude a unit, I have not seen them used often to inform instruction; they seem to be used more summatively than formatively.

### **Critical Analysis of Assessment Design**

To begin an analysis of the literary essay assessment genre, I will use the six criteria for effective assessment I identified on my Rubric 2.0.

#### **1. Promotes deeper, higher-level thinking/understanding**

- a. Some of this will depend on the nature of the prompt created by the teacher, but from my experience, literary analysis essays are undoubtedly intended to require and measure the kinds of understanding that go deep into the higher levels of Bloom's taxonomy. Of the Understanding by Design's six facets of understanding, literary analysis essays are generally focused on the interpretation facet, which Wiggins & McTighe (2005) say is different from explanation because "The act of interpretation is more fraught with inherent ambiguity than the act of theory building and testing...there will always be as many meanings as

there are thoughtful interpreters” (p. 91). Requiring students to interpret a work of literature and provide justification for their interpretation seems to be a prime example of an assessment that promotes deeper understanding rather than rote memorization. **Full Understanding**

**2. Promotes student ownership of learning**

- a. If a rubric is provided to the student before the essay is due, that rubric may theoretically be used by that student to monitor his or her own learning. Outside of that, from my experience there is not much inherently in the literary analysis essay genre that directly encourages students to take ownership of their own learning. **No Understanding**

**3. Occurs throughout the learning process**

- a. A literary analysis essay usually occurs at the end of a literature unit, so it is not occurring throughout the learning process. Shepard (2000) states that assessment should not be “postponed as only the end-point of instruction” (p. 10). Throughout the literature unit, a teacher may help students prepare for this essay by asking discussion questions that require interpretation or by having students do shorter writing prompts. However, the literary analysis essay itself is typically at the end of instruction and serves as an end-point for that learning process. **No Understanding**

**4. Aligned with the desired learning outcome**

- a. This criterion will vary based on what exactly the teacher’s desired learning outcome is. Often, a teacher will select a focus for the reading of a novel, such as symbolism in *Lord of the Flies*. If students have spent time learning about symbolism and analyzing it throughout the novel and the instructor wants them to walk away with an in-depth understanding of symbolism, it follows that an essay analyzing and interpreting the symbolism would be an aligned assessment. If, however, that essay asked students to interpret the themes of the novel, that assessment would not be aligned. The means of assessing the essay must also be considered. If the desired learning outcomes are to provide a critical interpretation of the novel but the rubric focuses on the writing itself, such as sentence structure and mechanics, the assessment is not aligned with the desired outcomes. This piece is a critical part of the UbD model (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). Finally, the essay format itself may not be best suited for a teacher’s goals if those goals are to evaluate student’s mental procedures since essays require a high level of writing ability. Marzano (2006) says, “Given that short written responses adequately address mental procedures and are not as dependent on writing ability, it is advisable to rely on them (as opposed to essays) to assess mental procedures” (p. 80). The high level of writing inherent in essays must be aligned with what the teacher is seeking to measure. **Partial Understanding**

## **5. Measures transfer of knowledge**

- a. Opportunities are present to assess students on their ability to transfer their knowledge in the literary analysis essay. Typically, this kind of essay requires students to draw on their reading of the text and their understanding of discussions and activities that occurred throughout the unit. Students then develop their own thesis statement synthesizing these elements. If a teacher provides a prompt that merely asks students to repeat something already covered in-depth in class, not much transfer would be assessed. On the other hand, if students are challenged to create an original thesis or given a prompt that goes beyond classwork, transfer would be required. **Partial Understanding**

## **6. Includes language accessible for all learners**

- a. Again, this criterion would vary depending on the particular natures of the assessment given by the instructor. Vocabulary common in essays (introduction, thesis, paragraphs, conclusion, transitions, evidence, citations, etc.) must be understood by all students (Trumbell & Lash, 2013). These definitions and the expectations associated with them may vary slightly from teacher to teacher, so a review may be in order the first time the assessment is given. **Partial Understanding**

Another means of analyzing the literary analysis essay genre is considering how the assessment itself might inform the instruction design. Understanding by Design (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005) asks educators to implement a “backward design process” by considering the learning outcomes first, then the evidence necessitated to assess these learning outcomes, and then the instruction needed (p. 146). In the case of the literary analysis essay, a desired learning outcome might be to be able to craft an original thesis interpreting a novel and support that thesis with salient evidence. In order to get to that point, students must have opportunities to learn what a thesis is and practice smaller skills leading up to the final essay. For example, during the literature unit, the teacher could have students create a thesis statement after reading a small part of the book. Instructional activities such as discussion should be created with the end goals in mind so that students have enough schema, skills, and practice opportunities to be prepared for that literary analysis essay. An essential question could also be crafted for the unit, such as, “How can I explain and support my own understanding of a classic novel?” if the focus was on the essay itself. A more specific essential question for the unit could also be provided, such as “How do authors use symbolism and why does it matter?” depending on the focus for that particular unit. Beginning with an essential question such as these help to “stay focused on big ideas” and help ensure that the assessment is aligned with the desired outcomes (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005, p. 105).

Finally, the literary analysis essay can be examined through the lens of formative assessment. Since it is usually completed entirely at the end of the unit and nothing more is done with it, the assessment is more summative than formative in nature. Throughout the writing

process, there are opportunities for formative assessment, and I believe many teachers do utilize these. However, I see more opportunities for formative assessment earlier in the unit, perhaps by giving students smaller opportunities to practice the kinds of thinking and skills asked of them in the essay. Throughout these opportunities, students could chart their progress and engage in self-reflection as recommended by Marzano (2006, p. 104). Finally, even a summative assessment can become formative if the student is allowed to learn from the feedback and try again as UbD author Jay McTighe explains in a Hawker Brownlow Education YouTube video (2013). In the manner it is traditionally used, the literary analysis essay falls short in the formative assessment department, but there are plentiful opportunities to strengthen this aspect.

### **Recommendations to Professional Community**

After concluding my analysis of the literary essay based on our course readings, I can attest that this genre provides terrific opportunities for learning and may be an effective means of assessment. However, the implementation of the essay is where things can either go really right or really wrong. Here is what should *not* happen in this assessment:

- The essay prompt does not ask students to go beyond what was learned/discussed in class.
- The essay prompt is unrelated to the desired learning outcome.
- The essay is assigned at the end of a unit with no opportunities to practice before or to revise after.
- The vocabulary needed to understand the assessment is not understood by all students.
- There is no feedback from the teacher prior to submission of the final product.
- There is no opportunity for students to reflect on their own learning and adjust accordingly.

On the other hand, here are ways that this assessment could be implemented most effectively:

- The prompt requires deeper understanding and higher-level thinking. It requires students to build on what they have learned/discuss but to expand, reinterpret, and/or transfer that knowledge (Shepard, 2000).
- The prompt is aligned with the desired learning outcomes. It assesses the knowledge and/or skills the teacher is seeking, and the students know what these are (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005).
- Similar tasks and demands have been attempted by students prior to the essay. Feedback on those tasks has been provided (Marzano, 2006).
- The teacher is certain all students understand the language of the assessment and reviews any terms that may be needed (Trumbell & Lash, 2013).
- Self-assessment is an integral part of the assessment process (Marzano, 2006; Black & Wiliam, 1998).
- Students are allowed to revise the essay and resubmit as needed ([Hawker Brownlow Education]).

If these recommendations are put into practice, the literary analysis essay may provide excellent feedback for the teacher and student regarding the student's learning. Merely assigning an essay, however, does not guarantee its effectiveness.

### **Literary Analysis in the Digital Context**

It is now common practice for essays to be typed, especially as technology becomes more prevalent in schools. In order to make the most of the digital context and to help expand the formative assessment opportunities with literary essays, a platform such as Google Classroom could be used. On the class's page, the assignment, rubric, and perhaps exemplars could be posted so that all information is in one place. If students type their essays here, the teacher has access to all essays in one place at any time and on any device, thereby streamlining the feedback process. Teachers can insert comments through the drafting and revision stages, offering feedback of all kinds in order to assist in learning. Sharing the draft with others makes peer revision run smoothly.

Technology could also help increase the level of formative assessment for both students and teachers. Students could electronically highlight the rubric to indicate their perceived level and add comments for justification. The "view revision history" feature allows both teacher and learner to revisit all earlier drafts in order to see growth or opportunities for additional learning. By taking advantage of all that the Google platform has to offer, a teacher could significantly increase the effectiveness of the classic literary analysis essay.

### **References**

- Black, P., & Wiliam, D. (1998). Inside the black box: Raising standards through classroom assessment. *The Phi Delta Kappan*, 80(2), 139-148.
- [Hawker Brownlow Education]. (2013, July 17). *What is Understanding by Design? Author Jay McTighe explains* [Video File]. Retrieved from [https://www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=145&v=d8F1SnWaIfE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=145&v=d8F1SnWaIfE)
- Marzano, R. J. (2006). *Classroom assessment & grading that work*. Alexandria, VA: Assoc. for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Shepard, L. (2000). The role of assessment in a learning culture. *The Journal of Education*, 189(1/2), 95-106.
- Wiggins, G. P., & McTighe, J. (2005). *Understanding by Design*. Alexandria, VA: Assoc. for Supervision and Curriculum Development.