

How-to: Getting Students to Delve Deeper into Literary Analysis

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Overview

The goal is to motivate students to investigate literature with depth and connection with guidance and modeling. Through in-depth class discussions and independent construction, students gain the confidence (often the biggest challenge) to delve beyond surface-level observations and differentiate between textual evidence and personal connection. Depending upon the grade level and book, students may explore such literary devices as symbol, theme, and character analysis. If desired, you adapt the creative approach below to further explore timeline, setting, metaphor, allegory, and author's intent.

Depending on your agenda and grade level, the following approaches may be explored in any order you see fit. You may also omit or simplify steps. These methods may be done throughout the reading (being continuously added to) or after the entire work has been read. Each of these steps can be offered in one- or two-hour lessons.

For simplicity's sake, I will be referring to two books as examples: *Where the Wild Things Are* for younger grades and *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* for older grades. These strategies, however, may be applied to any work of literature.

Symbols

Step 1: I like to begin by engaging the class in a discussion on symbols. I ask for students to give examples to refresh our understanding. Younger grades might discuss a flag for a country or a heart for love. Older grades might suggest a crown for royalty or skull and crossbones for danger.

Step 2: After we've established that everyone understands the meaning of symbols, we collectively list them on a chart. We don't worry about their meaning at first. We simply aim to write as many as we possibly can. If the class is stuck, the teacher and I offer up the first few to get the ball rolling. For *Where the Wild Things Are*, we might jot down teeth and claws, Max's crown, the boat, the jungle, mother, and the hot dinner. For *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, we might write down teacups, the drink-me bottle, books, caterpillars, the pocket watch, and a painted rose.

Step 3: Once we have a solid list, I ask what these symbols might mean. Again, the teacher and I give a few examples if the class is unsure. Next to our symbols, our list for *Where the Wild Things Are* might read something like this: teeth and claws = anger, temper tantrums, our animalistic nature; Max's crown = king, being in control, being the boss; the boat = running away, adventure; the jungle = a place with no rules and no parents; mother = the person who always loves and protects us (even when we are wild things); and a hot dinner = our mother's care. Our list for *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* might end up like this: teacups = civilized

madness; the drink-me bottle = transformation or growing up; books = adventures for the mind; caterpillars = metamorphosis or growing up; the pocket watch = grown-up time, order and control; and a painted rose = our desire to control or conquer nature.

Step 4: Allow students time to consider these and other symbols on their own. Ask students to draw (or paint) and write about the symbols as they see them. Pose questions such as: Which symbols seem the most important to the story and why? Do you see any other possible meanings? Do you see any other symbols that the class did not find?

Theme

Step 1: Begin by engaging the class in a discussion on theme. I ask for students to give examples to refresh our understanding. Younger grades might bring up themes such as kindness, family, or bravery. Older grades might consider perseverance, coming-of-age, or sacrifice. It's always helpful to ask them to cite the work in which they found the theme.

Step 2: After we've established that everyone understands the meaning of theme, we collectively list them on a chart. We don't worry about their application at first. We simply aim to write as many as we possibly can. Once again, if the class is stuck, the teacher and I suggest the first few to get the ball rolling. For *Where the Wild Things Are*, we might jot down anger, (lack of) power or control, imagination, and family. Our list for *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* might look something like this: growing up, curiosity, or Victorian perception of nature.

Step 3: Once we have a solid list, I ask for textual evidence for each theme. Again, the teacher and I give a few examples if the class is unsure. Next to our themes, our list for *Where the Wild Things Are* might read something like this: anger—seen in Max's reaction (temper tantrum) to his mother when scolded for behaving like a "wild thing"; (lack of) power or control—demonstrated when Max is sent to bed without supper; imagination—seen when Max abandons the rules of his world and embarks on an adventure where he is the sole ruler (or mother-figure); family—seen when he realizes that power cannot replace love and his desire to return to his mother. Our themes for *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* might end up like this: growing up—seen when Alice experiences the frustrations of place and characters who follow no rules and her desire for order; curiosity—seen throughout the novel in Alice's fearless investigation of unknown lands and rituals; and Victorian perception of nature—seen in the Queen of Hearts's desire to have utter control over nature (to the point of demanding the roses be red).

Step 4: Allow students time to consider these and other themes on their own. Ask students to create a collage depicting a theme of their choice. The collage should include examples of textual evidence. Pose questions such as: Why, out of all the themes we discussed, did you select this one? How is it important to our understanding of the story? Does your illustration match your written assessment of the theme? Is there anything else you can add?

Character Analysis

Step 1: Begin by engaging the class in a discussion on character analysis. We might construct a list of things to consider, such as:

- How can we describe the characters' personality or temperament? Are they happy/angry/smart/sweet/rude/etc.?
- Does her physical appearance contribute to our understanding of her?
- How does the character see himself?
- How do others see her?
- What does the character want most?
- What will he do to get it?
- What are her friends or family like?

Step 2: The teacher and I often find it beneficial to deconstruct collectively one character. Max, for example, is wild, angry, frustrated, loves trouble, desires control, and—ultimately—loves his mom. The Queen of Hearts desires absolute power over her kingdom and nature itself, uses fear to get her way, and is cruel to animals, cards, and subjects. Unbeknownst to her, she is also undermined by the king, who quietly pardons everyone she sentences to be beheaded.

Step 3: Allow students time to consider these and other characters on their own. Using decorative papers and embellishments, ask students to decorate symbolically and transform two blank paper figures into two characters of their choice. A wild thing, for example, could show his duality as Max's alter ego by possessing fearful teeth and claws (anger), but also tears (longing for his mother). The Queen of Hearts, in contrast, may show no evidence of love or softness. Her clothes might be absurdly decadent, but her face may be cruel. She might be stomping on a white rose, or abusing a flamingo and hedgehog. She might even be hoarding all the tarts.

Step 4: Ask students to explain their analytic and artistic choices. What are your characters wearing? Are they holding objects? If so, what do these objects represent? Can you describe the expression you gave the characters? How do you feel about these two characters? How do other characters in the story view them? If desired, you can also have students write a statement from the characters' perspective.

Common Core Standards

The proposed approaches align with career and college readiness guidelines in Reading, Writing, and Language including, but not limited to: they demonstrate independence; they build strong content knowledge; they respond to the varying demands of audience, task, purpose, and discipline; they comprehend as well as critique; and they value evidence.

National Art Standards

These approaches for investigating literature through art align with numerous National Art Standards including, but not limited to: (Anchor 1) Generating and conceptualizing artistic ideas, and engaging in creative and innovative thinking; (Anchor 2) Organizing and developing artistic ideas and experimenting with forms, structures, materials, concepts, media, and art-

making approaches; (Anchor 3) Refining and completing artistic work and engaging in constructive critique, reflecting on, revising, and refining work; and (Anchor 4) Conveying meaning through the presentation of artistic work.

Variations and Expansions of the Project

- Visual art and writing can be collected in an artist's book. The book can further be developed with opinion writing, comparisons with other stories, and observations on perspective and intent. Pages can be bound or created in a journal.
- Students can work in teams to create literary posters. Groups can focus on characters, symbols, themes, historical context, and relevance to student life or comparative literature.
- Students can work in groups to construct literary assemblages. For younger grades, groups might be organized by characters or themes. For older grades, by chapters or themes.
- The class can create tableaux, or living pictures, to depict their interpretation of the work. These can be simple poses, breakout tableaux, or followed by questions and answers.
- Characters and scenes can be brought to life when students create a series of photographs depicting essential elements of the story.
- By hand or with Comic Life, students can create comics depicting their understanding of the literature at hand. This can include retelling and sequencing, character comparisons, complex perspectives, or analysis of symbols or themes.

Recommended Resources

Literary Glossary

Link to the following lesson plans or images: Alice Artists' Books, Maniac McGee Artists' Books, Number the Stars Photographs, Number the Stars Assemblages, Cinderella Artists' Books, Cinderella Assemblages, some of April's Tableaux pieces (preferably with *Where the Wild Things Are*)