

Working Questions for Literature Essays

Think of literary research questions as falling into two basic categories. Internal questions refer only to the text. External inquiries are about the wider context, how the piece was made, or how it is received. Here are some suggestions for framing questions to shape an essay.

For Analysis

How questions are about the format or the function of specific elements

Why questions are about the meaning or purpose of the work

“So what?” questions are about the relationships between claims and evidence; reasons a reader should believe or care about observations

For Evidence

Who Internal: Characters, Point of view, Setting in terms of people

Who External: Author’s Biography, Place in Literature, Setting’s sociology

What Internal: Plot, Dialogue, Format, Nature of the piece

What External: Publication details, Genre, History

When Internal: Setting, Point of view, Timelines,

When External: Era of publication, History of criticism

Where Internal: Setting in terms of place, Point of view in terms of place

Where External: Place of publication, Where it is read or published

Why Internal: Aesthetics, Tone, Themes, Images

Why External: Purpose, Audience, Reception of the work