Literary Analysis: Getting Started

When writing an essay about literature, it is not acceptable to merely summarize a text. Instead, you should use your own insights, backed by quotations, to illustrate a certain point or answer a specific question about a text. Use the following list of questions to help you find a topic you would like to pursue:

- What is the author trying to say?
- What is the theme of the work? How does the author relay that theme?
- Does the author use literary devices like analogy, satire, or foreshadowing? How do these techniques contribute to the general meaning or theme?
- What is the author's tone? Why does the author use this tone, and how does it relate to the larger meaning?
- Who is the narrator? How does his or her point of view differ from the author's? Why is the narration told from this perspective?
- What is the setting of the text? How does the setting contribute to the text's overall meaning?
- What symbols does the author employ? How do the symbols contribute to themes and the work as a whole?
- Does the work have a motif? What is the significance of the motif?
- Which character interests you the most? Why?
- Do the characters change over time? How and why? What do those changes mean?
- What is a specific character's purpose in relation to other characters or the work as a whole?
- Does the work remind you of other works (poems, books, articles)? How are they similar?
- Can you compare and contrast two characters in the text?
- Can you critique the work through different perspectives, such as feminist, conservative, Marxist, historical, or theological? What changes about your interpretation in those perspectives?
- How does the author portray a particular social group? Why?
- What interests you most about the work?
- Were there parts of the work you found problematic?
- Were you confused by any parts of the text? Why?
- What were the strongest and weakest points of the work?

Remember, with literary analysis, it is not enough to identify themes and patterns. You must also analyze these elements and create an argument about the work that extends beyond the plot.