**Recipe for analyzing a passage from a text**

Analyzing a single passage from a text allows you to practice the kind of close reading skills that provide the raw material for writing a critical essay. When you write up an analysis like this (as a class assignment or on an exam) you are offering a somewhat more formalized version of the kind of analysis you would do verbally in class. Written up analyses tend not to have fully shaped beginnings and endings, and to be more informal in style (without Works Cited etc), but the better ones do have a logical shape to them. What follows is some advice on the kinds of elements that might make up a good analysis of a passage—both verbal and written.

**1 Establish the context. Briefly describe where the passage is to be found in the text-as-a-whole.**

**"**This passage occurs near the beginning/middle/end of the poem/story/novel, just after . . . and just before . . ."

**2. *Very briefly*, indicate the basic content of the passage.**

"It tells of how . . . ."

Sometimes this information might be incorporated into the analysis itself. Often, however, it is a good way to set the analysis up. You just don't want to take much time with it. Only describe the essential.

**3. State one or more ways in which this passage is *significant*.**

"The importance / significance of this passage lies in the way it illustrates . . . ."

"There are two particularly important themes in this passage. This first has to do with . . . ."

Often, in a written version, a new paragraph is useful here.

Also, if you argue that the passage is significant in more than one way, you should think about which way is most important and make that the end point of your answer. "But the most important thing about this passage is . . . ." This creates a periodic structure—a climax. Sometimes no point you raise is more significant than another, in which case the order is not so important.

**4. After each claim of significance, zero in on specific lines and words from the passage that illustrate the claim. Cite these lines and words and explain how they prove what you have claimed.**

"The words "x" and "y" really drive home the idea that . . . "

"This is most evident in the lines . . . ."

**5. When you are thinking about what might be significant about a passage, consider both formal and thematic elements. If there is formal device that seems important, cite it and explain its significance. Generally, formal devices in a passage are significant when they create emphasis or multiple layers of meaning or when they are part of a larger pattern that runs through the text (in which case they are likely to create emphasis and multiple layers of meaning at the same time!).**

"Much of the effect of this passage is dependant on the use of the natural imagery . . . "

"So much of the effect of this passage depends on point of view . . . "

**6. In the concluding part of your written version or the last part of your verbal analysis, think about how the elements you have discussed in 3-5 connect to the text-as-a-whole and possibly to wider issues that go beyond this single text. This is sometimes an opportunity to raise wider theoretical or contextual issues, though the practical reality of a short written analysis usually means you can't do a whole lot of this.**

"This poem's treatment of . . . follows on representations of similar issues in . . . and . . . It also anticipates a more extended exploration of . . . in . . . . "

"What is common about all these treatments is . . . . which shows the extent to which . . . ultimately pointing to . . ."

Remember that the last words you write will resonate especially strongly. Don't just trail off but try to end with a strong statement that recaptures (without slavishly repeating) the main line of analysis you have pursued.