The Catcher in the Rye

J. D. Salinger
Context

Jerome David Salinger was born in New York City in 1919. The son of a wealthy cheese importer, Salinger grew up in a fashionable neighborhood in Manhattan and spent his youth being shuttled between various prep schools before his parents finally settled on the Valley Forge Military Academy in 1934. He graduated from Valley Forge in 1936 and attended a number of colleges, including Columbia University, but did not graduate from any of them. While at Columbia, Salinger took a creative writing class in which he excelled, cementing the interest in writing that he had maintained since his teenage years. Salinger had his first short story published in 1940; he continued to write as he joined the army and fought in Europe during World War II. Upon his return to the United States and civilian life in 1946, Salinger wrote more stories, publishing them in many respected magazines. In 1951, Salinger published his only full-length novel, *The Catcher in the Rye*, which propelled him onto the national stage.

Many events from Salinger’s early life appear in *The Catcher in the Rye*. For instance, Holden Caulfield moves from prep school to prep school, is threatened with military school, and knows an older Columbia student. In the novel, such autobiographical details are transplanted into a post–World War II setting. *The Catcher in the Rye* was published at a time when the burgeoning American industrial economy made the nation prosperous and entrenched social rules served as a code of conformity for the younger generation. Because Salinger used slang and profanity in his text and because he discussed adolescent sexuality in a complex and open way, many readers were offended, and *The Catcher in the Rye* provoked great controversy upon its release. Some critics argued that the book was not serious literature, citing its casual and informal tone as evidence. The book was—and continues to be—banned in some communities, and it consequently has been thrown into the center of debates about First Amendment rights, censorship, and obscenity in literature.

Though controversial, the novel appealed to a great number of people. It was a hugely popular bestseller and general critical success. Salinger’s writing seemed to tap into the emotions of readers in an unprecedented way. As countercultural revolt began to grow during the 1950s and 1960s, *The Catcher in the Rye* was frequently read as a tale of an individual’s alienation within a heartless world. Holden seemed to stand for young people everywhere, who felt themselves beset on all sides by pressures to grow up and live their lives according to the rules, to disengage from meaningful human connection, and to restrict their own personalities and conform to a bland cultural norm. Many readers saw Holden Caulfield as a symbol of pure, unfettered individuality in the face of cultural oppression.

In the same year that *The Catcher in the Rye* appeared, Salinger published a short story in *The New Yorker* magazine called “A Perfect Day for Bananafish,” which proved to be the first in a series of stories about the fictional Glass family. Over the next decade, other “Glass” stories appeared in the same magazine: “Franny,” “Zooey,” and “Raise High the Roof-Beam, Carpenters.” These and other stories are available in the only fictional Glass family. Over the next decade, other “Glass” stories appeared in the same magazine: “Franny” (1953), “Franny and Zooey” (1961), and “Raise High the Roof-Beam, Carpenters and Seymour: An Introduction” (1963). Though *Nine Stories* received some critical acclaim, the critical reception of the later stories was hostile. Critics generally found the Glass siblings to be ridiculously and insufferably precocious and judgmental.

Beginning in the early 1960s, as his critical reputation waned, Salinger began to publish less and to disengage from society. In 1965, after publishing another Glass story (“Hapworth 26, 1924”) that was widely reviled by critics, he withdrew almost completely from public life, a stance he has maintained up to the present. This reclusiveness, ironically, has made Salinger even more famous, transforming him into a cult figure. To some degree, Salinger’s cult status has overshadowed, or at least tinged, many readers’ perceptions of his work. As a recluse, Salinger, for many, embodies much the same spirit as his precocious, wounded characters, and many readers view author and characters as the same being. Such a reading of Salinger’s work clearly oversimplifies the process of fiction writing and the relationship between the author and his creations. But, given Salinger’s iconoclastic behavior, the general view that Salinger is himself a sort of Holden Caulfield is understandable.

The few brief public statements that Salinger has made suggest that he continues to write stories to this day, implying that the majority of his works may not appear until after his death. Meanwhile, there are signs that readers are becoming more favorably disposed toward Salinger’s later writings, meaning that *The Catcher in the Rye* may one day be seen as part of a much larger literary whole.
Plot Overview

The Catcher in the Rye is set around the 1950s and is narrated by a young man named Holden Caulfield. Holden is not specific about his location while he's telling the story, but he makes it clear that he is undergoing treatment in a mental hospital or sanatorium. The events he narrates take place in the few days between the end of the fall school term and Christmas, when Holden is sixteen years old.

Holden's story begins on the Saturday following the end of classes at the Pencey prep school in Agerstown, Pennsylvania. Pencey is Holden's fourth school; he has already failed out of three others. At Pencey, he has failed four out of five of his classes and has received notice that he is being expelled, but he is not scheduled to return home to Manhattan until Wednesday. He visits his elderly history teacher, Spencer, to say goodbye, but when Spencer tries to reprimand him for his poor academic performance, Holden becomes annoyed.

Back in the dormitory, Holden is further irritated by his unhygienic neighbor, Ackley, and by his own roommate, Stradlater. Stradlater spends the evening on a date with Jane Gallagher, a girl whom Holden used to date and whom he still admires. During the course of the evening, Holden grows increasingly nervous about Stradlater's taking Jane out, and when Stradlater returns, Holden questions him insistently about whether he tried to have sex with her. Stradlater teases Holden, who flies into a rage and attacks Stradlater. Stradlater pins Holden down and bloody his nose. Holden decides that he's had enough of Pencey and will go to Manhattan three days early, stay in a hotel, and not tell his parents that he is back.

On the train to New York, Holden meets the mother of one of his fellow Pencey students. Though he thinks this student is a complete "bastard," he tells the woman made-up stories about how shy her son is and how well respected he is at school. When he arrives at Penn Station, he goes into a phone booth and considers calling several people, but for various reasons he decides against it. He gets in a cab and asks the cab driver where the ducks in Central Park go when the lagoon freezes, but his question annoys the driver. Holden has the cab driver take him to the Edmont Hotel, where he checks himself in.

From his room at the Edmont, Holden can see into the rooms of some of the guests in the opposite wing. He observes a man putting on silk stockings, high heels, a bra, a corset, and an evening gown. He also sees a man and a woman in another room taking turns spitting mouthfuls of their drinks into each other's faces and laughing hysterically. He interprets the couple's behavior as a form of sexual play and is both upset and aroused by it. After smoking a couple of cigarettes, he calls Faith Cavendish, a woman he has never met but whose number he got from an acquaintance at Princeton. Holden thinks he remembers hearing that she used to be a stripper, and he believes he can persuade her to have sex with him. He calls her, and though she is at first annoyed to be called at such a late hour by a complete stranger, she eventually suggests that they meet the next day. Holden doesn't want to wait that long and winds up hanging up without arranging a meeting.

Holden goes downstairs to the Lavender Room and sits at a table, but the waiter realizes he's a minor and refuses to serve him. He flirts with three women in their thirties, who seem like they're from out of town and are mostly interested in catching a glimpse of a celebrity. Nevertheless, Holden dances with them and feels that he is "half in love" with the blonde one after seeing how well she dances. After making some wisecracks about his age, they leave, letting him pay their entire tab.

As Holden goes out to the lobby, he starts to think about Jane Gallagher and, in a flashback, recounts how he got to know her. They met while spending a summer vacation in Maine, played golf and checkers, and held hands at the movies. One afternoon, during a game of checkers, her stepfather came onto the porch where they were playing, and when he left Jane began to cry. Holden had moved to sit beside her and kissed her all over her face, but she wouldn't let him kiss her on the mouth. That was the closest they came to "necking."

Holden leaves the Edmont and takes a cab to Ernie's jazz club in Greenwich Village. Again, he asks the cab driver where the ducks in Central Park go in the winter, and this cabbie is even more irritable than the first one. Holden sits alone at a table in Ernie's and observes the other patrons with distaste. He runs into Lillian Simmons, one of his older brother's former girlfriends, who invites him to sit with her and her date. Holden says he has to meet someone, leaves, and walks back to the Edmont.
Maurice, the elevator operator at the Edmont, offers to send a prostitute to Holden's room for five dollars, and Holden agrees. A young woman, identifying herself as "Sunny," arrives at his door. She pulls off her dress, but Holden starts to feel "peculiar" and tries to make conversation with her. He claims that he recently underwent a spinal operation and isn't sufficiently recovered to have sex with her, but he offers to pay her anyway. She sits on his lap and talks dirty to him, but he insists on paying her five dollars and showing her the door. Sunny returns with Maurice, who demands another five dollars from Holden. When Holden refuses to pay, Maurice punches him in the stomach and leaves him on the floor, while Sunny takes five dollars from his wallet. Holden goes to bed.

He wakes up at ten o'clock on Sunday and calls Sally Hayes, an attractive girl whom he has dated in the past. They arrange to meet for a matinee showing of a Broadway play. He eats breakfast at a sandwich bar, where he converses with two nuns about Romeo and Juliet. He gives the nuns ten dollars. He tries to telephone Jane Gallagher, but her mother answers the phone, and he hangs up. He takes a cab to Central Park to look for his younger sister, Phoebe, but she isn't there. He helps one of Phoebe's schoolmates tighten her skate, and the girl tells him that Phoebe might be in the Museum of Natural History. Though he knows that Phoebe's class wouldn't be at the museum on a Sunday, he goes there anyway, but when he gets there he decides not to go in and instead takes a cab to the Biltmore Hotel to meet Sally.

Holden and Sally go to the play, and Holden is annoyed that Sally talks with a boy she knows from Andover afterward. At Sally's suggestion, they go to Radio City to ice skate. They both skate poorly and decide to get a table instead. Holden tries to explain to Sally why he is unhappy at school, and actually urges her to run away with him to Massachusetts or Vermont and live in a cabin. When she refuses, he calls her a "pain in the ass" and laughs at her when she reacts angrily. She refuses to listen to his apologies and leaves.

Holden calls Jane again, but there is no answer. He calls Carl Luce, a young man who had been Holden's student advisor at the Whooton School and who is now a student at Columbia University. Luce arranges to meet him for a drink after dinner, and Holden goes to a movie at Radio City to kill time. Holden and Luce meet at the Wicker Bar in the Seton Hotel. At Whooton, Luce had spoken frankly with some of the boys about sex, and Holden tries to draw him into a conversation about it once more. Luce grows irritated by Holden's juvenile remarks about homosexuals and about Luce's Chinese girlfriend, and he makes an excuse to leave early. Holden continues to drink Scotch and listen to the pianist and singer.

Quite drunk, Holden telephones Sally Hayes and babbles about their Christmas Eve plans. Then he goes to the lagoon in Central Park, where he used to watch the ducks as a child. It takes him a long time to find it, and by the time he does, he is freezing cold. He then decides to sneak into his own apartment building and wake his sister, Phoebe. He is forced to admit to Phoebe that he was kicked out of school, which makes her mad at him. When he tries to explain why he hates school, she accuses him of not liking anything. He tells her his fantasy of being "the catcher in the rye," a person who catches little children as they are about to fall off of a cliff. Phoebe tells him that he has misremembered the poem that he took the image from: Robert Burns's poem says "if a body meet a body, coming through the rye," not "catch a body."

Holden calls his former English teacher, Mr. Antolini, who tells Holden he can come to his apartment. Mr. Antolini asks Holden about his expulsion and tries to counsel him about his future. Holden can't hide his sleepiness, and Mr. Antolini puts him to bed on the couch. Holden awakens to find Mr. Antolini stroking his forehead. Thinking that Mr. Antolini is making a homosexual overture, Holden hastily excuses himself and leaves, sleeping for a few hours on a bench at Grand Central Station.

Holden goes to Phoebe's school and sends her a note saying that he is leaving home for good and that she should meet him at lunchtime at the museum. When Phoebe arrives, she is carrying a suitcase full of clothes, and she asks Holden to take her with him. He refuses angrily, and she cries and then refuses to speak to him. Knowing she will follow him, he walks to the zoo, and then takes her across the park to a carousel. He buys her a ticket and watches her ride it. It starts to rain heavily, but Holden is so happy watching his sister ride the carousel that he is close to tears.

Holden ends his narrative here, telling the reader that he is not going to tell the story of how he went home and got "sick." He plans to go to a new school in the fall and is cautiously optimistic about his future.
## Character List

### Holden Caulfield
- The protagonist and narrator of the novel, Holden is a sixteen-year-old junior who has just been expelled for academic failure from a school called Pencey Prep. Although he is intelligent and sensitive, Holden narrates in a cynical and jaded voice. He finds the hypocrisy and ugliness of the world around him almost unbearable, and through his cynicism he tries to protect himself from the pain and disappointment of the adult world. However, the criticisms that Holden aims at people around him are also aimed at himself. He is uncomfortable with his own weaknesses, and at times displays as much phoniness, meanness, and superficiality as anyone else in the book. As the novel opens, Holden stands poised on the cliff separating childhood from adulthood. His inability to successfully negotiate the chasm leaves him on the verge of emotional collapse.

### Ackley
- Holden’s next-door neighbor in his dorm at Pencey Prep. Ackley is a pimply, insecure boy with terrible dental hygiene. He often barges into Holden’s room and acts completely oblivious to Holden’s hints that he should leave. Holden believes that Ackley makes up elaborate lies about his sexual experience.

### Stradlater
- Holden’s roommate at Pencey Prep. Stradlater is handsome, self-satisfied, and popular, but Holden calls him a “secret slob,” because he appears well groomed, but his toiletries, such as his razor, are disgustingly unclean. Stradlater is sexually active and quite experienced for a prep school student, which is why Holden also calls him a “sexy bastard.”

### Jane Gallagher
- A girl with whom Holden spent a lot of time one summer, when their families stayed in neighboring summer houses in Maine. Jane never actually appears in *The Catcher in the Rye*, but she is extremely important to Holden, because she is one of the few girls whom he both respects and finds attractive.

### Phoebe Caulfield
- Phoebe is Holden’s ten-year-old sister, whom he loves dearly. Although she is six years younger than Holden, she listens to what he says and understands him more than most other people do. Phoebe is intelligent, neat, and a wonderful dancer, and her childish innocence is one of Holden’s only consistent sources of happiness throughout the novel. At times, she exhibits great maturity and even chastises Holden for his immaturity. Like Mr. Antolini, Phoebe seems to recognize that Holden is his own worst enemy.

### Allie Caulfield
- Holden’s younger brother. Allie dies of leukemia three years before the start of the novel. Allie was a brilliant, friendly, red-headed boy—according to Holden, he was the smartest of the Caulfields. Holden is tormented by Allie’s death and carries around a baseball glove on which Allie used to write poems in green ink.

### D. B. Caulfield

### Sally Hayes
- A very attractive girl whom Holden has known and dated for a long time. Though Sally is well read, Holden claims that she is “stupid,” although it is difficult to tell whether this judgment is based in reality or merely in Holden’s ambivalence about being sexually attracted to her. She is certainly more conventional than Holden in her tastes and manners.
Mr. Spencer  
Holden’s history teacher at Pencey Prep, who unsuccessfully tries to shake Holden out of his academic apathy.

Carl Luce  
A student at Columbia who was Holden’s student advisor at the Whooton School. Luce is three years older than Holden and has a great deal of sexual experience. At Whooton, he was a source of knowledge about sex for the younger boys, and Holden tries to get him to talk about sex at their meeting.

Mr. Antolini  
Holden’s former English teacher at the Elkton Hills School. Mr. Antolini now teaches at New York University. He is young, clever, sympathetic, and likable, and Holden respects him. Holden sometimes finds him a bit too clever, but he looks to him for guidance. Like many characters in the novel, he drinks heavily.

Maurice  
The elevator operator at the Edmont Hotel, who procures a prostitute for Holden.

Sunny  
The prostitute whom Holden hires through Maurice. She is one of a number of women in the book with whom Holden clumsily attempts to connect.
Analysis of Major Characters

Holden Caulfield

The number of readers who have been able to identify with Holden and make him their hero is truly staggering. Something about his discontent, and his vivid way of expressing it, makes him resonate powerfully with readers who come from backgrounds completely different from his. It is tempting to inhabit his point of view and revel in his cantankerousness rather than try to deduce what is wrong with him. The obvious signs that Holden is a troubled and unreliable narrator are manifold: he fails out of four schools; he manifests complete apathy toward his future; he is hospitalized, and visited by a psychoanalyst, for an unspecified complaint; and he is unable to connect with other people. We know of two traumas in his past that clearly have something to do with his emotional state: the death of his brother Allie and the suicide of one of his schoolmates. But, even with that knowledge, Holden’s peculiarities cannot simply be explained away as symptoms of a readily identifiable disorder.

The most noticeable of Holden’s “peculiarities” is how extremely judgmental he is of almost everything and everybody. He criticizes and philosophizes about people who are boring, people who are insecure, and, above all, people who are “phony.” Holden carries this penchant for passing judgment to such an extreme that it often becomes extremely funny, such as when he speculates that people are so crass that someone will probably write “fuck you” on his tombstone. Holden applies the term “phony” not to people who are insincere but to those who are too conventional or too typical—for instance, teachers who “act like” teachers by assuming a different demeanor in class than they do in conversation, or people who dress and act like the other members of their social class. While Holden uses the label “phony” to imply that such people are superficial, his use of the term actually indicates that his own perceptions of other people are superficial. In almost every case, he rejects more complex judgments in favor of simple categorical ones.

A second facet of Holden’s personality that deserves comment is his attitude toward sex. Holden is a virgin, but he is very interested in sex, and, in fact, he spends much of the novel trying to lose his virginity. He feels strongly that sex should happen between people who care deeply about and respect one another, and he is upset by the realization that sex can be casual. Stradlater’s date with Jane doesn’t just make him jealous; it infuriates him to think of a girl he knows well having sex with a boy she doesn’t know well. Moreover, he is disturbed by the fact that he is aroused by women whom he doesn’t respect or care for, like the blonde tourist he dances with in the Lavender Room, or like Sally Hayes, whom he refers to as “stupid” even as he arranges a date with her. Finally, he is disturbed by the fact that he is aroused by kinky sexual behavior—particularly behavior that isn’t respectful of one’s sex partner, such as spitting in one’s partner’s face. Although Holden refers to such behavior as “crumby,” he admits that it is pretty fun, although he doesn’t think that it should be.

A brief note about Holden’s name: a “caul” is a membrane that covers the head of a fetus during birth. Thus, the caul in his name may symbolize the blindness of childhood or the inability of the child to see the complexity of the adult world. Holden’s full name might be read as Hold-on Caul-field: he wants to hold on to what he sees as his innocence, which is really his blindness.

Phoebe Caulfield

Before we meet Phoebe, Holden’s side of the story is all we’ve been given. He implies that he is the only noble character in a world of superficial and phony adults, and we must take him at his word. There seems to be a simple dichotomy between the sweet world of childhood innocence, where Holden wants to stay, and the cruel world of shallow adult hypocrisy, where he’s afraid to go. But Phoebe complicates his narrative. Instead of sympathizing with Holden’s refusal to grow up, she becomes angry with him. Despite being six years younger than her brother, Phoebe understands that growing up is a necessary process; she also understands that Holden’s refusal to mature reveals less about the outside world than it does about himself. Next to Phoebe, Holden’s stunted emotional maturity and stubborn outlook seem less charming and more foolish. Phoebe, then, serves as a guide and surrogate for the audience. Because she knows her brother better than we
do, we trust her judgments about him. Our allegiance to the narrator weakens slightly once we hear her side of the story.

Phoebe makes Holden’s picture of childhood—of children romping through a field of rye—seem oversimplified, an idealized fantasy. Phoebe’s character challenges Holden’s view of the world: she is a child, but she does not fit into Holden’s romanticized vision of childlike innocence. Although she never explicitly states it, Phoebe seems to realize that Holden’s bitterness toward the rest of the world is really bitterness toward himself. She sees that he is a deeply sad, insecure young man who needs love and support. At the end of the book, when she shows up at the museum and demands to come with him, she seems not so much to need Holden as to understand that he needs her.

Mr. Antolini

Mr. Antolini is the adult who comes closest to reaching Holden. He manages to avoid alienating Holden, and being labeled a “phony,” because he doesn’t behave conventionally. He doesn’t speak to Holden in the persona of a teacher or an authority figure, as Mr. Spencer does. He doesn’t object to Holden’s calling him in the middle of the night or to Holden’s being drunk or smoking. Moreover, by opening his door to Holden on the spur of the moment, he shows no reservations about exposing his private self, with his messy apartment, his older wife with her hair in curlers, and his own heavy drinking.

Mr. Antolini’s advice to Holden about why he should apply himself to his studies is also unconventional. He recognizes that Holden is different from other students, and he validates Holden’s suffering and confusion by suggesting that one day they may be worth writing about. He represents education not as a path of conformity but as a means for Holden to develop his unique voice and to find the ideas that are most appropriate to him.

When Mr. Antolini touches Holden’s forehead as he sleeps, he may overstep a boundary in his display of concern and affection. However, there is little evidence to suggest that he is making a sexual overture, as Holden thinks, and much evidence that Holden misinterprets his action. Holden indicates in Chapter 19 that he is extremely nervous around possible homosexuals and that he worries about suddenly becoming one. We also know that he has been thinking about sex constantly since leaving Pencey. Finally, this is not the only scene in which Holden recoils from a physical approach. He is made very uncomfortable when Sunny pulls off her dress and sits in his lap. Even when his beloved sister puts her arms around him, he remarks that she may be a little too affectionate sometimes.

Holden regrets his hasty judgment of Mr. Antolini, but this mistake is very important to him, because he finally starts to question his own practice of making snap judgments about people. Holden realizes that even if Mr. Antolini is gay, he can’t simply be dismissed as a “flit,” since he has also been kind and generous. Holden begins to acknowledge that Mr. Antolini is complex and that he has feelings.
Themes, Motifs & Symbols

Themes

Themes are the fundamental and often universal ideas explored in a literary work.

Alienation as a Form of Self-Protection

Throughout the novel, Holden seems to be excluded from and victimized by the world around him. As he says to Mr. Spencer, he feels trapped on “the other side” of life, and he continually attempts to find his way in a world in which he feels he doesn’t belong.

As the novel progresses, we begin to perceive that Holden’s alienation is his way of protecting himself. Just as he wears his hunting hat (see “Symbols,” below) to advertise his uniqueness, he uses his isolation as proof that he is better than everyone else around him and therefore above interacting with them. The truth is that interactions with other people usually confuse and overwhelm him, and his cynical sense of superiority serves as a type of self-protection. Thus, Holden’s alienation is the source of what little stability he has in his life.

As readers, we can see that Holden’s alienation is the cause of most of his pain. He never addresses his own emotions directly, nor does he attempt to discover the source of his troubles. He desperately needs human contact and love, but his protective wall of bitterness prevents him from looking for such interaction. Alienation is both the source of Holden’s strength and the source of his problems. For example, his loneliness propels him into his date with Sally Hayes, but his need for isolation causes him to insult her and drive her away. Similarly, he longs for the meaningful connection he once had with Jane Gallagher, but he is too frightened to make any real effort to contact her. He depends upon his alienation, but it destroys him.

The Painfulness of Growing Up

According to most analyses, *The Catcher in the Rye* is a bildungsroman, a novel about a young character’s growth into maturity. While it is appropriate to discuss the novel in such terms, Holden Caulfield is an unusual protagonist for a bildungsroman because his central goal is to resist the process of maturity itself. As his thoughts about the Museum of Natural History demonstrate, Holden fears change and is overwhelmed by complexity. He wants everything to be easily understandable and eternally fixed, like the statues of Eskimos and Indians in the museum. He is frightened because he is guilty of the sins he criticizes in others, and because he can’t understand everything around him. But he refuses to acknowledge this fear, expressing it only in a few instances—for example, when he talks about sex and admits that “[s]ex is something I just don’t understand. I swear to God I don’t” (Chapter 9).

Instead of acknowledging that adulthood scares and mystifies him, Holden invents a fantasy that adulthood is a world of superficiality and hypocrisy (“phoniness”), while childhood is a world of innocence, curiosity, and honesty. Nothing reveals his image of these two worlds better than his fantasy about the catcher in the rye: he imagines childhood as an idyllic field of rye in which children romp and play; adulthood, for the children of this world, is equivalent to death—a fatal fall over the edge of a cliff. His created understandings of childhood and adulthood allow Holden to cut himself off from the world by covering himself with a protective armor of cynicism. But as the book progresses, Holden’s experiences, particularly his encounters with Mr. Antolini and Phoebe, reveal the shallowness of his conceptions.

The Phoniness of the Adult World

“Phoniness,” which is probably the most famous phrase from *The Catcher in the Rye*, is one of Holden’s favorite concepts. It is his catch-all for describing the superficiality, hypocrisy, pretension, and shallowness that he encounters in the world around him. In Chapter 22, just before he reveals his fantasy of the catcher in the rye,
Holden explains that adults are inevitably phonies, and, what’s worse, they can’t see their own phoniness. Phoniness, for Holden, stands as an emblem of everything that’s wrong in the world around him and provides an excuse for him to withdraw into his cynical isolation.

Though oversimplified, Holden’s observations are not entirely inaccurate. He can be a highly insightful narrator, and he is very aware of superficial behavior in those around him. Throughout the novel he encounters many characters who do seem affected, pretentious, or superficial—Sally Hayes, Carl Luce, Maurice and Sunny, and even Mr. Spencer stand out as examples. Some characters, like Maurice and Sunny, are genuinely harmful. But although Holden expends so much energy searching for phoniness in others, he never directly observes his own phoniness. His deceptions are generally pointless and cruel and he notes that he is a compulsive liar. For example, on the train to New York, he perpetrates a mean-spirited and needless prank on Mrs. Morrow. He’d like us to believe that he is a paragon of virtue in a world of phoniness, but that simply isn’t the case. Although he’d like to believe that the world is a simple place, and that virtue and innocence rest on one side of the fence while superficiality and phoniness rest on the other, Holden is his own counterevidence. The world is not as simple as he’d like—and needs—it to be; even he cannot adhere to the same black-and-white standards with which he judges other people.

Motifs

Motifs are recurring structures, contrasts, and literary devices that can help to develop and inform the text’s major themes.

Loneliness

Holden’s loneliness, a more concrete manifestation of his alienation problem, is a driving force throughout the book. Most of the novel describes his almost manic quest for companionship as he flits from one meaningless encounter to another. Yet, while his behavior indicates his loneliness, Holden consistently shies away from introspection and thus doesn’t really know why he keeps behaving as he does. Because Holden depends on his isolation to preserve his detachment from the world and to maintain a level of self-protection, he often sabotages his own attempts to end his loneliness. For example, his conversation with Carl Luce and his date with Sally Hayes are made unbearable by his rude behavior. His calls to Jane Gallagher are aborted for a similar reason: to protect his precious and fragile sense of individuality. Loneliness is the emotional manifestation of the alienation Holden experiences; it is both a source of great pain and a source of his security.

Relationships, Intimacy, and Sexuality

Relationships, intimacy, and sexuality are also recurring motifs relating to the larger theme of alienation. Both physical and emotional relationships offer Holden opportunity to break out of his isolated shell. They also represent what he fears most about the adult world: complexity, unpredictability, and potential for conflict and change. As he demonstrates at the Museum of Natural History, Holden likes the world to be silent and frozen, predictable and unchanging. As he watches Phoebe sleep, Holden projects his own idealizations of childhood onto her. But in real-world relationships, people talk back, and Phoebe reveals how different her childhood is from Holden’s romanticized notion. Because people are unpredictable, they challenge Holden and force him to question his senses of self-confidence and self-worth. For intricate and unspoken reasons, seemingly stemming from Allie’s death, Holden has trouble dealing with this kind of complexity. As a result, he has isolated himself and fears intimacy. Although he encounters opportunities for both physical and emotional intimacy, he bungles them all, wrapping himself in a psychological armor of critical cynicism and bitterness. Even so, Holden desperately continues searching for new relationships, always undoing himself only at the last moment.

Lying and Deception

Lying and deception are the most obvious and hurtful elements of the larger category of phoniness. Holden’s definition of phoniness relies mostly on a kind of self-deception; he seems to reserve the most scorn for people
who think that they are something they are not or who refuse to acknowledge their own weaknesses. But lying to others is also a kind of phoniness, a type of deception that indicates insensitivity, callousness, or even cruelty. Of course, Holden himself is guilty of both these crimes. His random and repeated lying highlights his own self-deception—he refuses to acknowledge his own shortcomings and is unwilling to consider how his behavior affects those around him. Through his lying and deception, Holden proves that he is just as guilty of phoniness as the people he criticizes.

Symbols

*Symbols are objects, characters, figures, and colors used to represent abstract ideas or concepts.*

**The “Catcher in the Rye”**

As the source of the book’s title, this symbol merits close inspection. It first appears in Chapter 16, when a kid Holden admires for walking in the street rather than on the sidewalk is singing the Robert Burns song “Comin’ Thro’ the Rye.” In Chapter 22, when Phoebe asks Holden what he wants to do with his life, he replies with his image, from the song, of a “catcher in the rye.” Holden imagines a field of rye perched high on a cliff, full of children romping and playing. He says he would like to protect the children from falling off the edge of the cliff by “catching” them if they were on the verge of tumbling over. As Phoebe points out, Holden has misheard the lyric. He thinks the line is “If a body catch a body comin’ through the rye,” but the actual lyric is “If a body meet a body, coming through the rye.”

The song “Comin’ Thro’ the Rye” asks if it is wrong for two people to have a romantic encounter out in the fields, away from the public eye, even if they don’t plan to have a commitment to one another. It is highly ironic that the word “meet” refers to an encounter that leads to recreational sex, because the word that Holden substitutes—“catch”—takes on the exact opposite meaning in his mind. Holden wants to catch children before they fall out of innocence into knowledge of the adult world, including knowledge of sex.

**Holden’s Red Hunting Hat**

The red hunting hat is one of the most recognizable symbols from twentieth-century American literature. It is inseparable from our image of Holden, with good reason: it is a symbol of his uniqueness and individuality. The hat is outlandish, and it shows that Holden desires to be different from everyone around him. At the same time, he is very self-conscious about the hat—he always mentions when he is wearing it, and he often doesn’t wear it if he is going to be around people he knows. The presence of the hat, therefore, mirrors the central conflict in the book: Holden’s need for isolation versus his need for companionship.

It is worth noting that the hat’s color, red, is the same as that of Allie’s and Phoebe’s hair. Perhaps Holden associates it with the innocence and purity he believes these characters represent and wears it as a way to connect to them. He never explicitly comments on the hat’s significance other than to mention its unusual appearance.

**The Museum of Natural History**

Holden tells us the symbolic meaning of the museum’s displays: they appeal to him because they are frozen and unchanging. He also mentions that he is troubled by the fact that he has changed every time he returns to them. The museum represents the world Holden wishes he could live in: it’s the world of his “catcher in the rye” fantasy, a world where nothing ever changes, where everything is simple, understandable, and infinite. Holden is terrified by the unpredictable challenges of the world—he hates conflict, he is confused by Allie’s senseless death, and he fears interaction with other people.

**The Ducks in the Central Park Lagoon**

Holden’s curiosity about where the ducks go during the winter reveals a genuine, more youthful side to his character. For most of the book, he sounds like a grumpy old man who is angry at the world, but his search for
the ducks represents the curiosity of youth and a joyful willingness to encounter the mysteries of the world. It is a memorable moment, because Holden clearly lacks such willingness in other aspects of his life.

The ducks and their pond are symbolic in several ways. Their mysterious perseverance in the face of an inhospitable environment resonates with Holden’s understanding of his own situation. In addition, the ducks prove that some vanishings are only temporary. Traumatized and made acutely aware of the fragility of life by his brother Allie’s death, Holden is terrified by the idea of change and disappearance. The ducks vanish every winter, but they return every spring, thus symbolizing change that isn’t permanent, but cyclical. Finally, the pond itself becomes a minor metaphor for the world as Holden sees it, because it is “partly frozen and partly not frozen.” The pond is in transition between two states, just as Holden is in transition between childhood and adulthood.
Important Quotations Explained

1. "Life is a game, boy. Life is a game that one plays according to the rules."
   "Yes, sir. I know it is. I know it."

   Game, my ass. Some game. If you get on the side where all the hot-shots are, then it’s a game, all right—I’ll admit that. But if you get on the other side, where there aren’t any hot-shots, then what’s a game about it? Nothing. No game.

   This quotation is from Holden’s conversation with Spencer in Chapter 2. His former teacher is needling him about his failures at Pencey; at this point, he lectures Holden about the importance of playing by the rules. The conversation succinctly illuminates key aspects of Holden’s character. We see his silent contempt for adults, which is evidenced by the silent ridiculing and cursing of Spencer that Holden hides beneath his nodding, compliant veneer. We also see how alienated he feels. He clearly identifies with those on the “other side” of the game, and he feels alone and victimized, as though the world is against him. At this point in the novel, Holden’s sense of disadvantage and corresponding bitterness seem somewhat strange, given his circumstances: he’s clearly a bright boy from a privileged New York family. As the book progresses, however, we learn that Holden has built a cynical psychological armor around himself to protect himself from the complexities of the world.

2. [Ackley] took another look at my hat . . . “Up home we wear a hat like that to shoot deer in, for Chrissake,” he said. “That’s a deer shooting hat.”
   “Like hell it is.” I took it off and looked at it. I sort of closed one eye, like I was taking aim at it.
   “This is a people shooting hat,” I said. “I shoot people in this hat.”

   This brief passage occurs in Chapter 3, after Holden has returned to his dorm room and is being pestered by Ackley. Of all the places in the novel where Holden discusses his hat, the most famous and recognizable symbol in the book, this is probably the most enlightening. It is obvious from the start that Holden uses the hat as a mark of individuality and independence. Here, we see how deeply his desire for independence is connected to his feeling of alienation, to the bitterness he has for the rest of the world. Of course, Holden will not really shoot people in this hat, but it remains a symbol of his scorn for convention. Holden nevertheless does “shoot people” in his own way: when he is in this cynical frame of mind, he expends all of his mental energy denigrating the people around him. He desires independence because he feels that the world is an inhospitable, ugly place that, he feels, deserves only contempt.

3. The best thing, though, in that museum was that everything always stayed right where it was. Nobody’d move. . . . Nobody’d be different. The only thing that would be different would be you.

   This passage, in which Holden explains why he loves the Museum of Natural History, is located in Chapter 16. Killing time before his date with Sally, Holden decides to walk from Central Park to the Museum of Natural History. Along the way, he remembers in detail his school trips to the museum. Holden has already demonstrated that he fears and does not know how to deal with conflict, confusion, and change. The museum presents him with a vision of life he can understand: it is frozen, silent, and always the same. Holden can think about and judge the Eskimo in the display case, but the Eskimo will never judge him back. It troubles him that he has changed each time he returns, while the museum’s displays remain completely the same. They represent the simple, idealistic, manageable vision of life that Holden wishes he could live.

   It is significant that in the final sentence Holden uses the second-person pronoun “you” instead of the first-person “me.” It seems to be an attempt to distance himself from the inevitable process of change. But the
impossibility of such a fantasy is the tragedy of Holden’s situation: rather than face the challenges around him, he retreats to a fantasy world of his own making. When he actually gets to the museum, he decides not to go in; that would require disturbing his fragile imaginative construction by making it encounter the real world. He wants life to remain frozen like the display cases in the museum.

4. . . . I’m standing on the edge of some crazy cliff. What I have to do, I have to catch everybody if they start to go over the cliff—I mean if they’re running and they don’t look where they’re going I have to come out from somewhere and catch them. That’s all I’d do all day. I’d just be the catcher in the rye and all.

This, the passage in which Holden reveals the source of the book’s title, is perhaps the most famous in the book. It occurs in Chapter 22, after Holden has slipped quietly back into his apartment and is speaking with Phoebe. They talk, argue, and then reconcile, and Phoebe asks Holden what he wants to do with his life. Holden responds with this image, which reveals his fantasy of idealistic childhood and of his role as the protector of innocence. His response makes sense, given what we already know about Holden: he prefers to retreat into his own imaginary view of the world rather than deal with the complexities of the world around him. He has a cynical, oversimplified view of other people, and a large part of his fantasy world is based on the idea that children are simple and innocent while adults are superficial and hypocritical. The fact that he is having this conversation with Phoebe, a child who is anything but simple and innocent, reveals the oversimplification of his worldview. Holden himself realizes this to a degree when he acknowledges that his idea is “crazy,” yet he cannot come up with anything more pragmatic; he has trouble seeing the world in any other way. His catcher in the rye fantasy reflects his innocence, his belief in pure, uncorrupted youth, and his desire to protect that spirit; on the other hand, it represents his extreme disconnection from reality and his naïve view of the world.

5. “I have a feeling that you’re riding for some kind of terrible, terrible fall. . . . The whole arrangement’s designed for men who, at some time or other in their lives, were looking for something their own environment couldn’t supply them with. . . . So they gave up looking.”

The conversation in which Mr. Antolini speaks these words takes place in Chapter 24. Holden has just left his parents’ apartment, following his conversation with Phoebe, and he is reaching a point of critical instability, having just burst into tears when Phoebe lent him her Christmas money. He goes to Mr. Antolini’s because he feels he can trust and confide in him—it seems to be his final chance to save himself. But Holden’s interaction with Mr. Antolini is the event that precipitates his full-blown breakdown. It completely unsets him, and leaves him feeling confused and unsure. While most of Holden’s confusion stems from what he interprets as a homosexual come-on from Mr. Antolini, some of it stems from the conversation they have. Both the conversation and Mr. Antolini’s head-rubbing serve a similar purpose: they upset Holden’s view of the way things are or the way he believes they ought to be.

Mr. Antolini’s words here resonate with the desires Holden has just expressed to Phoebe: like the catcher in the rye that Holden envisions, Mr. Antolini is trying to catch Holden in the midst of a “fall.” But the fall Mr. Antolini describes is very different from the one Holden had imagined. Holden pictured an idyllic world of childhood innocence from which children would fall into a dangerous world; Mr. Antolini describes Holden in an apathetic free fall—giving up, disengaging himself from the world, falling in a void removed from life around him. In both cases, we sense that although Holden envisions himself as the protector rather than the one to be protected, he is the one who really needs to be caught. Mr. Antolini guesses that Holden feels disconnected from his environment, and, as we have already seen, his assessment is accurate. Holden has isolated himself in an attempt to be his own savior, but Mr. Antolini’s image of falling presents a more accurate image of what awaits Holden on the other side of the “cliff.” It thus reveals the weaknesses of Holden’s romantic outlook.
# Key Facts

**Full title**  
The Catcher in the Rye

**Author**  
J. D. Salinger

**Type of work**  
Novel

**Genre**  
Bildungsroman (coming-of-age novel)

**Language**  
English

**Time and place written**  
Late 1940s–early 1950s, New York

**Date of first publication**  
July 1951; parts of the novel appeared as short stories in Collier’s, December 1945, and in The New Yorker, December 1946

**Publisher**  
Little, Brown and Company

**Narrator**  
Holden Caulfield, narrating from a psychiatric facility a few months after the events of the novel

**Point of view**  
Holden Caulfield narrates in the first person, describing what he himself sees and experiences, providing his own commentary on the events and people he describes.

**Tone**  
Holden’s tone varies between disgust, cynicism, bitterness, and nostalgic longing, all expressed in a colloquial style.

**Tense**  
Past

**Setting (time)**  
A long weekend in the late 1940s or early 1950s

**Setting (place)**  
Holden begins his story in Pennsylvania, at his former school, Pencey Prep. He then recounts his adventures in New York City.

**Protagonist**  
Holden Caulfield
Major Conflict
The major conflict is within Holden's psyche. Part of him wants to connect with other people on an adult level (and, more specifically, to have a sexual encounter), while part of him wants to reject the adult world as "phony," and to retreat into his own memories of childhood.

Rising Action
Holden's many attempts to connect with other people over the course of the novel bring his conflicting impulses—to interact with other people as an adult, or to retreat from them as a child—into direct conflict.

Climax
Possible climaxes include Holden's encounter with Sunny, when it becomes clear that he is unable to handle a sexual encounter; the end of his date with Sally, when he tries to get her to run away with him; and his departure from Mr. Antolini's apartment, when he begins to question his characteristic mode of judging other people.

Falling Action
Holden's interactions with Phoebe, culminating in his tears of joy at watching Phoebe on the carousel (at the novel's end he has retreated into childhood, away from the threats of adult intimacy and sexuality)

Themes
Alienation as a form of self-protection; the painfulness of growing up; the phoniness of the adult world

Motifs
Relationships, intimacy, and sexuality; loneliness; lying and deception

Symbols
The "catcher in the rye"; Holden's red hunting hat; the Museum of Natural History; the ducks in the Central Park lagoon

Foreshadowing
At the beginning of the novel, Holden hints that he has been hospitalized for a nervous breakdown, the story of which is revealed over the course of the novel.
Study Questions

1. Holden narrates the story of The Catcher in the Rye while he is recovering from his breakdown. Do you think the promise of recovery that Holden experiences as he watches the carousel at the end of the novel has been fulfilled? Specifically, has Holden gained a more mature perspective on the events that he narrates?

It is possible that Holden is simply trying to recapture his original emotions and thoughts in his narration, and thus masking the fact that he has a more enlightened view regarding his behavior than he had during his escapades. But nothing he says seems to point to such irony on Holden’s part. Although Holden narrates his story after it has already happened, he seems to have gained little perspective. He alludes to his present situation only twice—one at the beginning and once at the end of the novel—and he refuses to tell us much about it. Additionally, many of the personal characteristics that have been damaging to him—for example, his cynicism and his lack of introspection—are in fact more pervasive in his narration of his story than in the story itself. As a result, the story he tells is only partial; he often glides over moments of particular trauma or treats painful moments by pretending not to care.

Because Holden is an unreliable narrator, in order to understand his character it is necessary to look beyond his words at his behavior and his interactions with others, using the knowledge of his personality acquired from his narration and applying it to his actions in the story. For instance, when Holden tells about being beaten and robbed by Maurice, the elevator operator, he admits that he thought he was dying and fantasizes about being a movie hero and seeking his revenge. But he never describes how any of this makes him feel; his sole comment is that the “goddam movies” can ruin a person. Since we have learned from previous moments in the book that Holden is a deeply sensitive boy, we can look beneath the surface of his narrative to see the suffering it covers up. In this scene, we also see how self-conflicted Holden is: he claims to hate movies, but he turns to them in a moment of crisis. Because the relationship between the events that Holden narrates and his explanations of those events is so complex and contradictory, and because he is unwilling to discuss any part of his “recovery,” nothing that Holden says suggests that he has really matured from his experiences.

2. What is the significance of the carousel in Chapter 25?

Holden’s release at the end of his story comes as he watches Phoebe ride the carousel. There is an element of magic to the moment, as the carousel is operating even though it is wintertime. Holden mentions that Phoebe protests, arguing that she is too big to ride the carousel, but Holden knows that she wants to do it and he buys her a ticket. Holden, on the other hand, declines to ride, which shows him recognizing, if not accepting, his status as an adult.

In a way, the carousel is reminiscent of the statues in the Museum of Natural History, because, like them, it never changes. It continues to move in circles and always stays in the same pace; it stays the same while the children who ride it continue to grow older. It would seem, then, that the pleasure Holden takes in watching Phoebe ride is, like his moments at the museum and watching Phoebe sleep, self-deceptive.

But Holden does show some signs of growth. He comments: “All the kids kept trying to grab for the gold ring, and so was old Phoebe . . . but I didn’t say anything . . . if they want to grab the gold ring, you have to let them do it . . . If they fall off, they fall off.” Holden’s pronouncement references his emendation of his “catcher in the rye” fantasy. Now he has come to terms with the idea that every child will eventually “fall”—out of innocence and into adulthood. Holden cannot prevent them from doing it or save them, just as he cannot prevent or save himself from becoming an adult. This recognition brings about a huge emotional release for him, and he begins to cry; the sky emulates him with a thunderstorm. Most of the other adults take refuge under the carousel’s canopy, but Holden stays out in the rain. Whether we are meant to take this action as one of defiance or acceptance is, like the remainder of the novel’s ending, unclear.
3. Though Holden never describes his psychological breakdown directly, it becomes clear as the novel progresses that he is growing increasingly unstable. How does Salinger indicate this instability to the reader while protecting his narrator’s reticence?

Salinger uses two main techniques with great efficiency. The first is to emphasize a contrast between Holden’s relatively casual description of his actions and the apparent desperation of the actions themselves. When Holden describes walking to the Central Park duck pond late at night, for instance, he casually mentions that he had icicles in his hair and worried about catching pneumonia, but he does not seem to consider it strange to walk outdoors with wet hair in freezing weather. It does seem strange to the reader, however, and Salinger uses that sense of strangeness, as well as Holden’s apparent obliviousness to it, to emphasize his mental imbalance. His other technique is to provide alternative viewpoints in the other characters’ responses to Holden’s behavior as guidelines. For instance, when Holden has his meltdown with Sally and tries to persuade her to flee society and live with him in a cabin, she repeatedly asks him to stop shouting. In his account of the scene, Holden claims he wasn’t shouting, but we believe Sally. Salinger uses her angry, fearful response to signal to the reader that Holden’s mental state is worse than he admits or acknowledges.
How to Write Literary Analysis

The Literary Essay: A Step-by-Step Guide

When you read for pleasure, your only goal is enjoyment. You might find yourself reading to get caught up in an exciting story, to learn about an interesting time or place, or just to pass time. Maybe you’re looking for inspiration, guidance, or a reflection of your own life. There are as many different, valid ways of reading a book as there are books in the world.

When you read a work of literature in an English class, however, you’re being asked to read in a special way: you’re being asked to perform literary analysis. To analyze something means to break it down into smaller parts and then examine how those parts work, both individually and together. Literary analysis involves examining all the parts of a novel, play, short story, or poem—elements such as character, setting, tone, and imagery—and thinking about how the author uses those elements to create certain effects.

A literary essay isn’t a book review: you’re not being asked whether or not you liked a book or whether you’d recommend it to another reader. A literary essay also isn’t like the kind of book report you wrote when you were younger, where your teacher wanted you to summarize the book’s action. A high school- or college-level literary essay asks, “How does this piece of literature actually work?” “How does it do what it does?” and, “Why might the author have made the choices he or she did?”

The Seven Steps

No one is born knowing how to analyze literature; it’s a skill you learn and a process you can master. As you gain more practice with this kind of thinking and writing, you’ll be able to craft a method that works best for you. But until then, here are seven basic steps to writing a well-constructed literary essay:

1. Ask questions
2. Collect evidence
3. Construct a thesis
4. Develop and organize arguments
5. Write the introduction
6. Write the body paragraphs
7. Write the conclusion

1. Ask Questions

When you’re assigned a literary essay in class, your teacher will often provide you with a list of writing prompts. Lucky you! Now all you have to do is choose one. Do yourself a favor and pick a topic that interests you. You’ll have a much better (not to mention easier) time if you start off with something you enjoy thinking about. If you are asked to come up with a topic by yourself, though, you might start to feel a little panicked. Maybe you have too many ideas—or none at all. Don’t worry. Take a deep breath and start by asking yourself these questions:

- **What struck you?** Did a particular image, line, or scene linger in your mind for a long time? If it fascinated you, chances are you can draw on it to write a fascinating essay.

- **What confused you?** Maybe you were surprised to see a character act in a certain way, or maybe you didn’t understand why the book ended the way it did. Confusing moments in a work of literature are like a loose thread in a sweater: if you pull on it, you can unravel the entire thing. Ask yourself why the author chose to write about that character or scene the way he or she did and you might tap into some important insights about the work as a whole.
• **Did you notice any patterns?** Is there a phrase that the main character uses constantly or an image that repeats throughout the book? If you can figure out how that pattern weaves through the work and what the significance of that pattern is, you’ve almost got your entire essay mapped out.

• **Did you notice any contradictions or ironies?** Great works of literature are complex; great literary essays recognize and explain those complexities. Maybe the title (*Happy Days*) totally disagrees with the book’s subject matter (hungry orphans dying in the woods). Maybe the main character acts one way around his family and a completely different way around his friends and associates. If you can find a way to explain a work’s contradictory elements, you’ve got the seeds of a great essay.

At this point, you don’t need to know exactly what you’re going to say about your topic; you just need a place to begin your exploration. You can help direct your reading and brainstorming by formulating your topic as a question, which you’ll then try to answer in your essay. The best questions invite critical debates and discussions, not just a rehashing of the summary. Remember, you’re looking for something you can prove or argue based on evidence you find in the text. Finally, remember to keep the scope of your question in mind: is this a topic you can adequately address within the word or page limit you’ve been given? Conversely, is this a topic big enough to fill the required length?

**Good Questions**

“Are Romeo and Juliet’s parents responsible for the deaths of their children?”

“Why do pigs keep showing up in *Lord of the Flies*?”

“Are Dr. Frankenstein and his monster alike? How?”

**Bad Questions**

“What happens to Scout in *To Kill a Mockingbird*?”

“What do the other characters in *Julius Caesar* think about Caesar?”

“How does Hester Prynne in *The Scarlet Letter* remind me of my sister?”

2. **Collect Evidence**

Once you know what question you want to answer, it’s time to scour the book for things that will help you answer the question. Don’t worry if you don’t know what you want to say yet—right now you’re just collecting ideas and material and letting it all percolate. Keep track of passages, symbols, images, or scenes that deal with your topic. Eventually, you’ll start making connections between these examples and your thesis will emerge.

Here’s a brief summary of the various parts that compose each and every work of literature. These are the elements that you will analyze in your essay, and which you will offer as evidence to support your arguments. For more on the parts of literary works, see the Glossary of Literary Terms at the end of this section.

**Elements of Story**

These are the *whats* of the work—what happens, where it happens, and to whom it happens.

• **Plot:** All of the events and actions of the work.

• **Character:** The people who act and are acted upon in a literary work. The main character of a work is known as the protagonist.

• **Conflict:** The central tension in the work. In most cases, the protagonist wants something, while opposing forces (antagonists) hinder the protagonist’s progress.

• **Setting:** When and where the work takes place. Elements of setting include location, time period, time of day, weather, social atmosphere, and economic conditions.
• **Narrator:** The person telling the story. The narrator may straightforwardly report what happens, convey the subjective opinions and perceptions of one or more characters, or provide commentary and opinion in his or her own voice.

• **Themes:** The main idea or message of the work—usually an abstract idea about people, society, or life in general. A work may have many themes, which may be in tension with one another.

**Elements of Style**

These are the *hows*—how the characters speak, how the story is constructed, and how language is used throughout the work.

• **Structure and organization:** How the parts of the work are assembled. Some novels are narrated in a linear, chronological fashion, while others skip around in time. Some plays follow a traditional three- or five-act structure, while others are a series of loosely connected scenes. Some authors deliberately leave gaps in their works, leaving readers to puzzle out the missing information. A work’s structure and organization can tell you a lot about the kind of message it wants to convey.

• **Point of view:** The perspective from which a story is told. In *first-person point of view*, the narrator involves him or herself in the story. (“I went to the store”; “We watched in horror as the bird slammed into the window.”) A first-person narrator is usually the protagonist of the work, but not always. In *third-person point of view*, the narrator does not participate in the story. A third-person narrator may closely follow a specific character, recounting that individual character’s thoughts or experiences, or it may be what we call an omniscient narrator. Omniscient narrators see and know all: they can witness any event in any time or place and are privy to the inner thoughts and feelings of all characters. Remember that the narrator and the author are not the same thing!

• **Diction:** Word choice. Whether a character uses dry, clinical language or flowery prose with lots of exclamation points can tell you a lot about his or her attitude and personality.

• **Syntax:** Word order and sentence construction. Syntax is a crucial part of establishing an author’s narrative voice. Ernest Hemingway, for example, is known for writing in very short, straightforward sentences, while James Joyce characteristically wrote in long, incredibly complicated lines.

• **Tone:** The mood or feeling of the text. Diction and syntax often contribute to the tone of a work. A novel written in short, clipped sentences that use small, simple words might feel brusque, cold, or matter-of-fact.

• **Imagery:** Language that appeals to the senses, representing things that can be seen, smelled, heard, tasted, or touched.

• **Figurative language:** Language that is not meant to be interpreted literally. The most common types of figurative language are *metaphors* and *similes*, which compare two unlike things in order to suggest a similarity between them—for example, “All the world’s a stage,” or “The moon is like a ball of green cheese.” (Metaphors say one thing *is* another thing; similes claim that one thing *is like* another thing.)

3. **Construct a Thesis**

When you’ve examined all the evidence you’ve collected and know how you want to answer the question, it’s time to write your thesis statement. A *thesis* is a claim about a work of literature that needs to be supported by evidence and arguments. The thesis statement is the heart of the literary essay, and the bulk of your paper will be spent trying to prove this claim. A good thesis will be:

• **Arguable.** “*The Great Gatsby* describes New York society in the 1920s” isn’t a thesis—it’s a fact.
• **Provable through textual evidence.** “*Hamlet* is a confusing but ultimately very well-written play” is a weak thesis because it offers the writer’s personal opinion about the book. Yes, it’s arguable, but it’s not a claim that can be proved or supported with examples taken from the play itself.

• **Surprising.** “Both George and Lenny change a great deal in *Of Mice and Men*” is a weak thesis because it’s obvious. A really strong thesis will argue for a reading of the play that is not immediately apparent.

• **Specific.** “Dr. Frankenstein’s monster tells us a lot about the human condition” is almost a really great thesis statement, but it’s still too vague. What does the writer mean by “a lot”? How does the monster tell us so much about the human condition?

**Good Thesis Statements**

**Question:** In *Romeo and Juliet*, which is more powerful in shaping the lovers’ story: fate or foolishness?

**Thesis:** “Though Shakespeare defines Romeo and Juliet as ‘star-crossed lovers’ and images of stars and planets appear throughout the play, a closer examination of that celestial imagery reveals that the stars are merely witnesses to the characters’ foolish activities and not the causes themselves.”

**Question:** How does the bell jar function as a symbol in Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar*?

**Thesis:** “A bell jar is a bell-shaped glass that has three basic uses: to hold a specimen for observation, to contain gases, and to maintain a vacuum. The bell jar appears in each of these capacities in *The Bell Jar*, Plath’s semi-autobiographical novel, and each appearance marks a different stage in Esther’s mental breakdown.”

**Question:** Would Piggy in *The Lord of the Flies* make a good island leader if he were given the chance?

**Thesis:** “Though the intelligent, rational, and innovative Piggy has the mental characteristics of a good leader, he ultimately lacks the social skills necessary to be an effective one. Golding emphasizes this point by giving Piggy a foil in the charismatic Jack, whose magnetic personality allows him to capture and wield power effectively, if not always wisely.”

4. **Develop and Organize Arguments**

The reasons and examples that support your thesis will form the middle paragraphs of your essay. Since you can’t really write your thesis statement until you know how you’ll structure your argument, you’ll probably end up working on steps 3 and 4 at the same time.

There’s no single method of argumentation that will work in every context. One essay prompt might ask you to compare and contrast two characters, while another asks you to trace an image through a given work of literature. These questions require different kinds of answers and therefore different kinds of arguments. Below, we’ll discuss three common kinds of essay prompts and some strategies for constructing a solid, well-argued case.

**Types of Literary Essays**

• **Compare and contrast**

  *Compare and contrast the characters of Huck and Jim in* The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.

  Chances are you’ve written this kind of essay before. In an academic literary context, you’ll organize your arguments the same way you would in any other class. You can either go *subject by subject or point by point*. In the former, you’ll discuss one character first and then the second. In the latter, you’ll choose several traits (attitude toward life, social status, images and metaphors associated with the character) and devote a paragraph to each. You may want to use a mix of these two approaches—for example, you may want to spend a paragraph a piece broadly sketching Huck’s and Jim’s personalities before transitioning into a paragraph or two that describes a few key points of comparison. This can be a highly effective strategy if you want to make a counterintuitive argument—that, despite seeming to be totally different, the two objects being compared are actually similar in a very important way (or vice versa). Remember that your essay should reveal something fresh or unexpected about the text, so think beyond the obvious parallels and differences.
• Trace

Choose an image—for example, birds, knives, or eyes—and trace that image throughout Macbeth.

Sounds pretty easy, right? All you need to do is read the play, underline every appearance of a knife in Macbeth, and then list them in your essay in the order they appear, right? Well, not exactly. Your teacher doesn’t want a simple catalog of examples. He or she wants to see you make connections between those examples—that’s the difference between summarizing and analyzing. In the Macbeth example above, think about the different contexts in which knives appear in the play and to what effect. In Macbeth, there are real knives and imagined knives; knives that kill and knives that simply threaten. Categorize and classify your examples to give them some order. Finally, always keep the overall effect in mind. After you choose and analyze your examples, you should come to some greater understanding about the work, as well as your chosen image, symbol, or phrase’s role in developing the major themes and stylistic strategies of that work.

• Debate

Is the society depicted in 1984 good for its citizens?

In this kind of essay, you’re being asked to debate a moral, ethical, or aesthetic issue regarding the work. You might be asked to judge a character or group of characters (Is Caesar responsible for his own demise?) or the work itself (Is Jane Eyre a feminist novel?). For this kind of essay, there are two important points to keep in mind. First, don’t simply base your arguments on your personal feelings and reactions. Every literary essay expects you to read and analyze the work, so search for evidence in the text. What do characters in 1984 have to say about the government of Oceania? What images does Orwell use that might give you a hint about his attitude toward the government? As in any debate, you also need to make sure that you define all the necessary terms before you begin to argue your case. What does it mean to be a “good” society? What makes a novel “feminist”? You should define your terms right up front, in the first paragraph after your introduction.

Second, remember that strong literary essays make contrary and surprising arguments. Try to think outside the box. In the 1984 example above, it seems like the obvious answer would be no, the totalitarian society depicted in Orwell’s novel is not good for its citizens. But can you think of any arguments for the opposite side? Even if your final assertion is that the novel depicts a cruel, repressive, and therefore harmful society, acknowledging and responding to the counterargument will strengthen your overall case.

5. Write the Introduction

Your introduction sets up the entire essay. It’s where you present your topic and articulate the particular issues and questions you’ll be addressing. It’s also where you, as the writer, introduce yourself to your readers. A persuasive literary essay immediately establishes its writer as a knowledgeable, authoritative figure.

An introduction can vary in length depending on the overall length of the essay, but in a traditional five-paragraph essay it should be no longer than one paragraph. However long it is, your introduction needs to:

• Provide any necessary context. Your introduction should situate the reader and let him or her know what to expect. What book are you discussing? Which characters? What topic will you be addressing?

• Answer the “So what?” question. Why is this topic important, and why is your particular position on the topic noteworthy? Ideally, your introduction should pique the reader’s interest by suggesting how your argument is surprising or otherwise counterintuitive. Literary essays make unexpected connections and reveal less-than-obvious truths.

• Present your thesis. This usually happens at or very near the end of your introduction.

• Indicate the shape of the essay to come. Your reader should finish reading your introduction with a good sense of the scope of your essay as well as the path you’ll take toward proving your thesis. You don’t need to spell out every step, but you do need to suggest the organizational pattern you’ll be using.
Your introduction should not:

• Be vague. Beware of the two killer words in literary analysis: interesting and important. Of course the work, question, or example is interesting and important—that’s why you’re writing about it!

• Open with any grandiose assertions. Many student readers think that beginning their essays with a flamboyant statement such as, “Since the dawn of time, writers have been fascinated with the topic of free will,” makes them sound important and commanding. You know what? It actually sounds pretty amateurish.

• Wildly praise the work. Another typical mistake student writers make is extolling the work or author. Your teacher doesn’t need to be told that “Shakespeare is perhaps the greatest writer in the English language.” You can mention a work’s reputation in passing—by referring to The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn as “Mark Twain’s enduring classic,” for example—but don’t make a point of bringing it up unless that reputation is key to your argument.

• Go off-topic. Keep your introduction streamlined and to the point. Don’t feel the need to throw in all kinds of bells and whistles in order to impress your reader—just get to the point as quickly as you can, without skimping on any of the required steps.

6. Write the Body Paragraphs

Once you’ve written your introduction, you’ll take the arguments you developed in step 4 and turn them into your body paragraphs. The organization of this middle section of your essay will largely be determined by the argumentative strategy you use, but no matter how you arrange your thoughts, your body paragraphs need to do the following:

• Begin with a strong topic sentence. Topic sentences are like signs on a highway: they tell the reader where they are and where they’re going. A good topic sentence not only alerts readers to what issue will be discussed in the following paragraph but also gives them a sense of what argument will be made about that issue. “Rumor and gossip play an important role in The Crucible” isn’t a strong topic sentence because it doesn’t tell us very much. “The community’s constant gossiping creates an environment that allows false accusations to flourish” is a much stronger topic sentence—it not only tells us what the paragraph will discuss (gossip) but how the paragraph will discuss the topic (by showing how gossip creates a set of conditions that leads to the play’s climactic action).

• Fully and completely develop a single thought. Don’t skip around in your paragraph or try to stuff in too much material. Body paragraphs are like bricks: each individual one needs to be strong and sturdy or the entire structure will collapse. Make sure you have really proven your point before moving on to the next one.

• Use transitions effectively. Good literary essay writers know that each paragraph must be clearly and strongly linked to the material around it. Think of each paragraph as a response to the one that precedes it. Use transition words and phrases such as however, similarly, on the contrary, therefore, and furthermore to indicate what kind of response you’re making.

7. Write the Conclusion

Just as you used the introduction to ground your readers in the topic before providing your thesis, you’ll use the conclusion to quickly summarize the specifics learned thus far and then hint at the broader implications of your topic. A good conclusion will:

• Do more than simply restate the thesis. If your thesis argued that The Catcher in the Rye can be read as a Christian allegory, don’t simply end your essay by saying, “And that is why The Catcher in the Rye can
be read as a Christian allegory.” If you’ve constructed your arguments well, this kind of statement will just be redundant.

- **Synthesize the arguments, not summarize them.** Similarly, don’t repeat the details of your body paragraphs in your conclusion. The reader has already read your essay, and chances are it’s not so long that they’ve forgotten all your points by now.

- **Revisit the “So what?” question.** In your introduction, you made a case for why your topic and position are important. You should close your essay with the same sort of gesture. What do your readers know now that they didn’t know before? How will that knowledge help them better appreciate or understand the work overall?

- **Move from the specific to the general.** Your essay has most likely treated a very specific element of the work—a single character, a small set of images, or a particular passage. In your conclusion, try to show how this narrow discussion has wider implications for the work overall. If your essay on *To Kill a Mockingbird* focused on the character of Boo Radley, for example, you might want to include a bit in your conclusion about how he fits into the novel’s larger message about childhood, innocence, or family life.

- **Stay relevant.** Your conclusion should suggest new directions of thought, but it shouldn’t be treated as an opportunity to pad your essay with all the extra, interesting ideas you came up with during your brainstorming sessions but couldn’t fit into the essay proper. Don’t attempt to stuff in unrelated queries or too many abstract thoughts.

- **Avoid making overblown closing statements.** A conclusion should open up your highly specific, focused discussion, but it should do so without drawing a sweeping lesson about life or human nature. Making such observations may be part of the point of reading, but it’s almost always a mistake in essays, where these observations tend to sound overly dramatic or simply silly.

**A+ Essay Checklist**

Congratulations! If you’ve followed all the steps we’ve outlined above, you should have a solid literary essay to show for all your efforts. What if you’ve got your sights set on an A+? To write the kind of superlative essay that will be rewarded with a perfect grade, keep the following rubric in mind. These are the qualities that teachers expect to see in a truly A+ essay. How does yours stack up?

- Demonstrates a thorough understanding of the book
- Presents an original, compelling argument
- Thoughtfully analyzes the text’s formal elements
- Uses appropriate and insightful examples
- Structures ideas in a logical and progressive order
- Demonstrates a mastery of sentence construction, transitions, grammar, spelling, and word choice
Suggested Essay Topics

1. Think about Holden’s vision of the nature of childhood and adulthood. Are the two realms as separate as Holden believes them to be? Where does he fit in?

2. The novel is structured around Holden’s encounters and interactions with other people. Does any pattern seem to emerge, or does anything change in his interactions as the novel progresses? How do Holden’s encounters with adults, children, women, and his peers evolve as the novel progresses?

3. Throughout the book, Holden longs for intimacy with other human beings. Discuss the different types of relationships Holden attempts and the different types of intimacy in the book. What is the role of sexuality in The Catcher in the Rye? How do Holden’s sexual relationships differ from his nonsexual encounters?

4. The most ambiguous encounter in the book is Holden’s night at Mr. Antolini’s apartment. What do you make of Mr. Antolini’s actions? Was he making a pass at Holden? What is the significance of his actions, and how do they relate to his role as someone trying to prevent Holden from “taking a fall”?

5. Holden often behaves like a prophet or a saint, pointing out the phoniness and wickedness in the world around him. Is Holden as perfect as he wants to be? Are there instances where he is phony and full of hypocrisy? What do these moments reveal about his character and his psychological problems?

A+ Student Essay

What is the significance of Mr. Antolini’s actions in Chapter 24? Was he making a pass at Holden?

Holden Caulfield’s interpretation of his teacher’s behavior is neither surprising nor unwarranted. After all, the drunken Mr. Antolini calls Holden “handsome,” creeps into the room where Holden is sleeping, and strokes the boy’s hair while he sleeps. Many readers might leap to conclude, as Holden does, that Mr. Antolini is making a pass at his student. However, Holden himself provides clues that suggest that Mr. Antolini’s interest in him is not sexual. Rather, Mr. Antolini sees himself as a guardian of wayward boys, the kind of “catcher in the rye” that Holden aspires to be.

James Castle, the Elkton student who committed suicide before the novel begins, seems to have given Mr. Antolini a burning need to help struggling boys. Mr. Antolini’s failure to see James’s depression or to save the boy after he jumped from the window permanently changes him. Holden’s initial description of his teacher’s response to Castle’s death comprises just one brief paragraph, which suggests that Holden does not understand the transformative effect James’s death had on Mr. Antolini. But Salinger means for us to look beneath the surface of Holden’s quick description and see the horror and power of the situation: the impressionable youth of the teacher whom Holden describes as “a pretty young guy, not much older than my brother D.B.”; the bravery of touching the corpse when no one else could bring himself to do it; the selflessness of draping a coat over the bloody body—all of the details that Holden provides suggest that Mr. Antolini responded to James’s suicide with true empathy, and that the incident had a profound effect on the kind young teacher.

Mr. Antolini’s lengthy exchange with Holden underlines his urge to help young people he perceives as needy, depressed, or heading for a fall. It is true that Mr. Antolini inquires about Holden’s love life, flatters him, and teases him. But this conversation is the same kind of idle chitchat Mr. Antolini engages in with everyone in his life. A witty man by nature, Mr. Antolini reflexively turns on the charm no matter whom he’s speaking to, whether it’s his students or his wife. He reserves his true passion and forcefulness for his long speech to Holden, in which he cautions him not to die “for some highly unworthy cause,” urges him to find direction, and advises him to seek comfort and a creative outlet in education. This speech, which Holden quotes in its entirety, comprises several pages. By devoting so much space to the speech, Salinger makes it clear that Mr. Antolini’s words are the most important part of this chapter. Holden also largely refrains from his usual editorializing here. By presenting Mr. Antolini’s words directly, rather than filtering them through
Holden, Salinger encourages the reader to make up his or her own mind about Mr. Antolini’s intentions. When Holden offers his interpretation of events, it remains just that—an interpretation. The reader is not required to believe Holden’s version in this case. In fact, because The Catcher in the Rye is usually so concerned with Holden’s subjective response to the world around him, the fact that we are presented with an unvarnished account of Mr. Antolini’s speech actually casts even stronger doubt on Holden’s interpretation of this particular incident.

Mr. Antolini does not see Holden as an object of lust. Rather, he sees him as a potential second James Castle. He wants to save Holden from despair just as Holden himself wants to save innocent children from the cruel truths of life. Although Holden’s initial reaction to Mr. Antolini’s kindness is repulsion, that does not mean that the teacher has failed. Perhaps the knowledge that there is one loving, intelligent adult in his life—a fact that Holden seems to grasp almost as soon as he leaves his teacher’s apartment—is what ultimately helps save the depressed boy.

**Glossary of Literary Terms**

**Antagonist**

The entity that acts to frustrate the goals of the PROTAGONIST. The antagonist is usually another CHARACTER but may also be a non-human force.

**antihero / antiheroine**

A PROTAGONIST who is not admirable or who challenges notions of what should be considered admirable.

**Character**

A person, animal, or any other thing with a personality that appears in a NARRATIVE.

**Climax**

The moment of greatest intensity in a text or the major turning point in the PLOT.

**Conflict**

The central struggle that moves the PLOT forward. The conflict can be the PROTAGONIST’s struggle against fate, nature, society, or another person.

**First-person point of view**

A literary style in which the NARRATOR tells the story from his or her own POINT OF VIEW and refers to himself or herself as “I.” The narrator may be an active participant in the story or just an observer.

**Hero / heroine**

The principal CHARACTER in a literary work or NARRATIVE.

**Imagery**

Language that brings to mind sense-impressions, representing things that can be seen, smelled, heard, tasted, or touched.

**Motif**

A recurring idea, structure, contrast, or device that develops or informs the major THEMES of a work of literature.

**Narrative**

A story.

**Narrator**

The person (sometimes a CHARACTER) who tells a story; the VOICE assumed by the writer. The narrator and the author of the work of literature are not the same person.
**Plot**

The arrangement of the events in a story, including the sequence in which they are told, the relative emphasis they are given, and the causal connections between events.

**Point of view**

The perspective that a narrative takes toward the events it describes.

**Protagonist**

The main character around whom the story revolves.

**Setting**

The location of a narrative in time and space. Setting creates mood or atmosphere.

**Subplot**

A secondary plot that is of less importance to the overall story but may serve as a point of contrast or comparison to the main plot.

**Symbol**

An object, character, figure, or color that is used to represent an abstract idea or concept. Unlike an emblem, a symbol may have different meanings in different contexts.

**Syntax**

The way the words in a piece of writing are put together to form lines, phrases, or clauses; the basic structure of a piece of writing.

**Theme**

A fundamental and universal idea explored in a literary work.

**Tone**

The author’s attitude toward the subject or characters of a story or poem or toward the reader.

**Voice**

An author’s individual way of using language to reflect his or her own personality and attitudes. An author communicates voice through tone, diction, and syntax.

### A Note on Plagiarism

Plagiarism—presenting someone else’s work as your own—rears its ugly head in many forms. Many students know that copying text without citing it is unacceptable. But some don’t realize that even if you’re not quoting directly, but instead are paraphrasing or summarizing, it is plagiarism unless you cite the source.

Here are the most common forms of plagiarism:

- Using an author’s phrases, sentences, or paragraphs without citing the source
- Paraphrasing an author’s ideas without citing the source
- Passing off another student’s work as your own

How do you steer clear of plagiarism? You should always acknowledge all words and ideas that aren’t your own by using quotation marks around verbatim text or citations like footnotes and endnotes to note another writer’s ideas. For more information on how to give credit when credit is due, ask your teacher for guidance or visit [www.sparknotes.com](http://www.sparknotes.com).