

Analyzing Character Motivation and Textual Purpose

30 minutes, 3 stages

When you read literature, understanding why characters act as they do and what the author intends to communicate are central to constructing meaning from the text. This assignment develops your ability to analyze character motivation, trace it to theme, and assess how the author's purpose shapes the work you are studying ([Outcome](#), [Outcome](#)). You will also form and test your own interpretation against textual evidence, a skill essential for diploma-level literary analysis ([Outcome](#)).

Stage 1: Close Reading and Annotation (10 min)

Select a passage of 300 to 400 words from a text you are currently studying in class. This should be a scene that reveals something significant about a character's choices or values.

Read the passage aloud to yourself. As you read, mark the text or write notes on a separate sheet addressing these questions:

1. What does the character do or say in this passage?
2. What does the character want or fear? Look for direct statements and for clues hidden in word choice, tone, or what the character does not say.
3. Circle or list any words that reveal the character's emotional state or attitude. Note the connotative meaning of these words, what associations or feelings do they carry beyond their dictionary definition?
4. What does the setting or situation pressure the character to do? How does the character respond?

Write a single sentence that names the character's primary motivation in this passage. For example: "Macbeth silences his doubts because ambition overrides his conscience" or "In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred risks speaking to Nick because her need for connection outweighs her fear of punishment."

Stage 2: Connecting Motivation to Author's Purpose (12 min)

Now step back from the passage. Answer these questions in short paragraphs (3 to 4 sentences each):

1. **What is the author's explicit purpose?** What is the text designed to do, entertain, persuade, critique, explore a moral question? How do you know?
2. **How does this character's motivation serve that purpose?** For instance, if the author's purpose is to examine the cost of ambition, how does your character's particular drive advance that exploration? If the purpose is to critique social injustice, what does the character's choice reveal about the system the author is questioning?
3. **What does the character's motivation suggest about the text's theme?** Theme is the controlling idea, the insight about human nature or society that the work develops. State the theme in one sentence, then explain how this character's motivation supports it ([Outcome](#), [Outcome](#)).

Stage 3: Evidence and Evaluation (8 min)

Write a short response (150 to 200 words) that answers this question: Is your interpretation of the character's motivation and the author's purpose supported by the text?

To answer this, do the following:

1. State your interpretation clearly in one sentence.

2. Name two specific pieces of evidence from the passage, a direct quotation, a detail of action, a description of setting, or a pattern in language, that support your reading.
3. Explain how each piece of evidence points to your interpretation. Do not simply repeat the evidence; show the logical connection.
4. Acknowledge one alternative reading. What might another reader see differently in this passage, and why is your interpretation more persuasive?

Self-check

Answer these questions honestly to confirm your understanding:

1. Can you name the character's primary motivation in the passage and explain one reason the character acts this way?
2. Can you connect that motivation to something larger, either the author's purpose for the text or the theme the text develops?
3. Have you used specific textual evidence (quotation, detail, or pattern) to support your interpretation, rather than making a general claim?