

A guide to textual analysis

Textual analysis is a broad term for various research methods used to describe, interpret and understand texts. All kinds of information can be gleaned from a text – from its literal meaning to the subtext, symbolism, assumptions, and values it reveals.

The methods used to conduct textual analysis depend on the field and the aims of the research. It often aims to connect the text to a broader social, political, cultural, or artistic context.

What is a text?

The term “text” is broader than it seems. A text can be a piece of writing, such as a book, an email, or a transcribed conversation. But in this context, a text can also be any object whose meaning and significance you want to interpret in depth: a film, an image, an artifact, even a place.

The methods you use to analyze a text will vary according to the type of object and the purpose of your analysis:

- Analysis of a short story might focus on the imagery, narrative perspective and structure of the text.
- To analyze a film, not only the dialogue but also the cinematography and use of sound could be relevant to the analysis.
- A building might be analyzed in terms of its architectural features and how it is navigated by visitors.
- You could analyze the rules of a game and what kind of behaviour they are designed to encourage in players.

While textual analysis is most commonly applied to written language, bear in mind how broad the term “text” is and how varied the methods involved can be.

Textual analysis in cultural and media studies

In the fields of cultural studies and media studies, textual analysis is a key component of research. Researchers in these fields take media and cultural objects – for example, music videos, social media content, billboard advertising – and treat them as texts to be analyzed.

Usually working within a particular theoretical framework (for example, using postcolonial theory, media theory, or semiotics), researchers seek to connect elements of their texts with issues in contemporary politics and culture. They might analyze many different aspects of the text:

- Word choice
- Design elements
- Location of the text
- Target audience
- Relationship with other texts

Textual analysis in this context is usually creative and qualitative in its approach. Researchers seek to illuminate something about the underlying politics or social context of the cultural object they’re investigating.

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Textual analysis in the social sciences

In the social sciences, textual analysis is often applied to texts such as interview transcripts and surveys, as well as to various types of media. Social scientists use textual data to draw empirical conclusions about social relations.

Textual analysis in the social sciences sometimes takes a more quantitative approach, where the features of texts are measured numerically. For example, a researcher might investigate how often certain words are repeated in social media posts, or which colors appear most prominently in advertisements for products targeted at different demographics.

Some common methods of analyzing texts in the social sciences include content analysis, thematic analysis, and discourse analysis.

Textual analysis in literary studies

Textual analysis is the most important method in literary studies. Almost all work in this field involves in-depth analysis of texts – in this context, usually novels, poems, stories or plays.

Because it deals with literary writing, this type of textual analysis places greater emphasis on the deliberately constructed elements of a text: for example, rhyme and meter in a poem, or narrative perspective in a novel. Researchers aim to understand and explain how these elements contribute to the text's meaning.

However, literary analysis doesn't just involve discovering the author's intended meaning. It often also explores potentially unintended

connections between different texts, asks what a text reveals about the context in which it was written, or seeks to analyze a classic text in a new and unexpected way.

Some well-known examples of literary analysis show the variety of approaches that can be taken:

- Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's book *Between Men* analyzes Victorian literature in light of more contemporary perspectives on gender .
- Roland Barthes' *S/Z* provides an in-depth structural analysis of a short story by Balzac.
- Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence* applies his own "influence theory" to an analysis of various classic poets.