

Writing about Literature

Writing about literature (a story, novel or a poem) can be very difficult mainly because you have to make an argument. You are arguing that your perspective –an interpretation, an evaluative judgment, or critical evaluation- is a valid one. Writing an extended literary essay often requires research, but mainly it requires a close reading of the text and a good argumentation.

What Makes a Good Literature Paper?

An argument / A debatable thesis statement

Like any argument paper you have ever written for a first-year composition course, you must have a specific, detailed thesis statement that reveals your perspective, and, like any good argument, your perspective must be one which is debatable.

Examples

You would *not* want to make an argument of this sort:

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is a play about a young man who seeks revenge.

That doesn't *say* anything-it's basically just a summary and is hardly debatable.

A better thesis would be this:

Hamlet experiences internal conflict because he is in love with his mother.

That is debatable, controversial even. The rest of a paper with this argument as its thesis will be an attempt to show, using specific examples from the text and evidence from scholars, (1) *how* Hamlet is in love with his mother, (2) *why* he's in love with her, and (3) *what* implications there are for reading the play in this manner.

You also want to avoid a thesis statement like this:

Spirituality means different things to different people. *King Lear*, *The Book of Romans*, and *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* each view the spirit differently.

Again, that says nothing that's not already self-evident. Why bother writing a paper about that? You're not writing an essay to list works that have nothing in common other than a general topic like "spirituality." You want to find certain works or authors that, while they may have several differences, do have some specific, unifying point. That point is your thesis.

A better thesis would be this:

Lear, Romans, and Zen each view the soul as the center of human personality.

Then you prove it, using examples from the texts that show that the soul is the center of personality.

Close Reading a Text

A story or novel can be difficult because fiction is generally very complex and usually includes several points or themes. To discover these interwoven meanings, you must read the work closely. Below are three techniques for reading fiction actively and critically. Close reading takes more time than quick, superficial reading, but doing a close reading will save you from a lot of frustration and anxiety when you begin to develop your thesis.

Use these "tracking" methods to yield a richer understanding of the text and lay a solid ground work for your thesis.

1. Use a highlighter, but only after you've read for comprehension. The point of highlighting at this stage is to note key passages, phrases, turning points in the story.

Pitfalls:

- Highlighting too much
- Highlighting without notes in the margins

2. Write marginal notes in the text.

These should be questions, comments, dialogue with the text itself.

A paragraph from Doris Lessing's short story "A Woman on a Roof" serves as an example:

The second paragraph could have a note from the reader like this:

Marginal Notes	Text
<p><i>Why is the man annoyed by the sunbather? Is Lessing commenting on sexist attitudes?</i></p>	<p>Then they saw her, between chimneys, about fifty yards away. She lay face down on a brown blanket. They could see the top part of her: black hair, a flushed solid back, arms spread out.</p> <p>"She's stark naked," said Stanley, sounding annoyed.</p>

3. Keep a notebook for free-write summaries and response entries.

Write quickly after your reading: ask questions, attempt answers and make comments about whatever catches your attention. A good question to begin with when writing response entries is "What point does the author seem to be making?"

4. Step back.

After close reading and annotating, can you now make a statement about the story's meaning? Is the author commenting on a certain type of person or situation? What is that comment?

Avoid Pitfalls

These four common assumptions about writing about fiction interfere with rather than help the writer. Learn to avoid them.

1. **Plot Summary Syndrome**

Assumes that the main task is simply recalling what happened in detail. Plot summary is just one of the requirements of writing about fiction, not the intended goal.

2. **Right Answer Roulette**

Assumes that writing about fiction is a "no win" game in which the student writer is forced to try to guess the RIGHT ANSWER that only the professor knows.

3. **The "Everything is Subjective" Shuffle**

Assumes that ANY interpretation of any literary piece is purely whimsy or personal taste. It ignores the necessity of testing each part of an interpretation against the whole text, as well as the need to validate each idea by reference to specifics from the text or quotations and discussion from the text.

4. **The "How Can You Write 500 Words About One Short Story?" Blues**

Assumes that writing the paper is only a way of stating the answer rather than an opportunity to explore an idea or explain what your own ideas are and why you have them. This sometimes leads to "padding," repeating the same idea in different words or worse, indiscriminate "expert" quoting: using too many quotes or quotes that are too long with little or no discussion.

Develop a Good Thesis

Once you've read the story or novel closely, look back over your notes for patterns of questions or ideas that interest you. Have most of your questions been about the characters, how they develop or change?

For example:

If you are reading Conrad's *The Secret Agent*, do you seem to be most interested in what the author has to say about society? Choose a pattern of ideas and express it in the form of a question and an answer such as the following:

Question: What does Conrad seem to be suggesting about early twentieth-century London society in his novel *The Secret Agent*?

Answer: Conrad suggests that all classes of society are corrupt.

Pitfalls:

Choosing too many ideas.

Choosing an idea without any support.

1. Once you have some general points to focus on, write your possible ideas and answer the questions that they suggest.

For example:

Question: How does Conrad develop the idea that all classes of society are corrupt?

Answer: He uses images of beasts and cannibalism whether he's describing socialites, policemen or secret agents.

2. To write your thesis statement, all you have to do is turn the question and answer around. You've already given the answer, now just put it in a sentence (or a couple of sentences) so that the thesis of your paper is clear.

For example:

In his novel, *The Secret Agent*, Conrad uses beast and cannibal imagery to describe the characters and their relationships to each other. This pattern of images suggests that Conrad saw corruption in every level of early twentieth-century London society.

3. Now that you're familiar with the story or novel and have developed a thesis statement, you're ready to choose the evidence you'll use to support your thesis. There are a lot of good ways to do this, but all of them depend on a strong thesis for their direction.

For example:

Here's a student's thesis about Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent*.

In his novel, *The Secret Agent*, Conrad uses beast and cannibal imagery to describe the characters and their relationships to each other. This pattern of images suggests that Conrad saw corruption in every level of early twentieth-century London society.

This thesis focuses on the idea of social corruption and the device of imagery. To support this thesis, you would need to find images of beasts and cannibalism within the text.

Literary Topics and Research

What kinds of topics are good ones?

The best topics are ones that originate out of your own reading of a work of literature, but here are some common approaches to consider:

- A discussion of a work's characters: are they realistic, symbolic, historically-based?
- A comparison/contrast of the choices different authors or characters make in a work
- A reading of a work based on an outside philosophical perspective (Ex. how would a Freudian read Hamlet?)
- A study of the sources or historical events that occasioned a particular work (Ex. comparing G.B. Shaw's Pygmalion with the original Greek myth of Pygmalion)
- An analysis of a specific image occurring in several works (Ex. the use of moon imagery in certain plays, poems, novels)
- A "deconstruction" of a particular work (Ex. unfolding an underlying racist worldview in Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness)
- A reading from a political perspective (Ex. how would a Marxist read William Blake's "London"?)
- A study of the social, political, or economic context in which a work was written — how does the context influence the work?

How do I start research?

- The Internet

Once you have decided on an interesting topic and work (or works), the best place to start is probably the Internet. Here you can usually find basic

biographical data on authors, brief summaries of works, possibly some rudimentary analyses, and even bibliographies of sources related to your topic.

- The library

The Internet, however, rarely offers serious direct scholarship; you will have to use sources found in the library, sources like journal articles and scholarly books, to get information that you can use to build your own scholarship-your literary paper. Consult the library's on-line catalog and the MLA Periodical Index. Avoid citing dictionary or encyclopedic sources in your final paper.

How do I use the information I find?

The secondary sources you find are only to be used as an aid. *Your* thoughts should make up most of the essay. As you develop your thesis, you will bring in the ideas of the scholars to back up what you have already said.

For example, say you are arguing that **Huck Finn is a Christ figure**; that's your basic thesis. You give evidence from the novel that allows this reading, and then, at the right place, you might say the following, a paraphrase:

According to Susan Thomas, Huck sacrifices himself because he wants to set Jim free (129).

If the scholar states an important idea in a memorable way, use a direct quote.

"Huck's altruism and feelings of compassion for Jim force him to surrender to the danger" (Thomas 129).

Either way, you will then link that idea to your thesis

Writing About Poetry

Writing about poetry can be one of the most demanding tasks that many students face in a literature class. Poetry, by its very nature, makes demands on a writer who attempts to analyze it that other forms of literature do not. So how can you write a clear, confident, well-supported essay about poetry? This handout offers answers to some common questions about writing about poetry.

What's the Point?

In order to write effectively about poetry, one needs a clear idea of what the point of writing about poetry is. When you are assigned an analytical essay about a poem in an English class, the goal of the assignment is usually to argue a specific thesis about the poem, using your analysis of specific elements in the poem and how those elements relate to each other to support your thesis.

So why would your teacher give you such an assignment? What are the benefits of learning to write analytic essays about poetry? Several important reasons suggest themselves:

- To help you learn to make a text-based argument. That is, to help you to defend ideas based on a text that is available to you and other readers. This sharpens your reasoning skills by forcing you to formulate an interpretation of something someone else has written and to support that interpretation by providing logically valid reasons why someone else who has read the poem should agree with your argument. This isn't a skill that is just important in academics, by the way. Lawyers, politicians, and journalists often find that they need to make use of similar skills.
- To help you to understand what you are reading more fully. Nothing causes a person to make an extra effort to understand difficult material like the task of writing about it. Also, writing has a way of helping you to see things that you may have otherwise missed simply by causing you to think about how to frame your own analysis.
- To help you enjoy poetry more! This may sound unlikely, but one of the real pleasures of poetry is the opportunity to wrestle with the text and co-create meaning with the author. When you put together a well-constructed analysis of the poem, you are not only showing that you understand what is there, you are also contributing to an ongoing conversation about the poem. If your reading is convincing enough, everyone who has read your essay will get a little more out of the poem because of your analysis.

What Should I Know about Writing about Poetry?

Most importantly, you should realize that a paper that you write about a poem or poems is an argument. Make sure that you have something specific that you want to say about the poem that you are discussing. This specific argument that you want to make about the poem will be your thesis. You will support this thesis by drawing examples and evidence from the poem itself. In order to make a credible argument about the poem, you will want to analyze how the poem works—what genre the poem fits into, what its themes are, and what poetic techniques and figures of speech are used.

What Can I Write About?

Theme: One place to start when writing about poetry is to look at any significant themes that emerge in the poetry. Does the poetry deal with themes related to love, death, war, or peace? What other themes show up in the poem? Are there particular historical events that are mentioned in the poem? What are the most important concepts that are addressed in the poem?

Genre: What kind of poem are you looking at? Is it an epic (a long poem on a heroic subject)? Is it a sonnet (a brief poem, usually consisting of fourteen lines)? Is it an ode? A satire? An elegy? A lyric? Does it fit into a specific literary movement such as Modernism, Romanticism, Neoclassicism, or Renaissance poetry? This is another place where you may need to do some research in an introductory poetry text or encyclopedia to find out what distinguishes specific genres and movements.

Versification: Look closely at the poem's rhyme and meter. Is there an identifiable rhyme scheme? Is there a set number of syllables in each line? Is there anything that you can tell about the poem from the choices that the author has made in this area?

Figures of speech: Are there literary devices being used that affect how you read the poem? Here are some examples of commonly discussed figures of speech:

- **metaphor:** comparison between two unlike things
- **simile:** comparison between two unlike things using "like" or "as"
- **metonymy:** one thing stands for something else that is closely related to it (For example, using the phrase "the crown" to refer to the king would be an example of metonymy.)
- **synecdoche:** a part stands in for a whole (For example, in the phrase "all hands on deck," "hands" stands in for the people in the ship's crew.)
- **personification:** a non-human thing is endowed with human characteristics
- **litotes:** a double negative is used for poetic effect (example: not unlike, not displeased)
- **irony:** a difference between the surface meaning of the words and the implications that may be drawn from them

Cultural Context: How does the poem you are looking at relate to the historical context in which it was written? For example, what's the cultural significance of Walt Whitman's famous elegy for Lincoln "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed" in light of post-Civil War cultural trends in the U.S.A? How does John Donne's devotional poetry relate to the contentious religious climate in seventeenth-century England? These questions may take you out of the literature section of your library altogether and involve finding out about philosophy, history, religion, economics, music, or the visual arts.

What style should I use?

When writing about poetry (and literature in general) it is useful to follow some standard conventions. First, when you analyze a poem, it is best to use present tense rather than past tense for your verbs. Second, you will want to make use of numerous quotations from the poem and explain their meaning and their significance to your argument. After all, if you do not quote the poem itself when you are making an argument about it, you damage your credibility. If your teacher asks for outside criticism of the poem as well, you should also cite points made by other critics that are relevant to your argument. A third point to remember is that there are various citation formats for citing both the material you get from the poems themselves and the information you get from other critical sources. The most common citation format for writing about poetry is the **Modern Language Association (MLA) format**.*

Literary Terms

Many literary terms describe how an author communicates his or her ideas. Look through the text and try to identify some of methods he or she uses to convey the patterns of ideas you are most interested in. The following terms will help you express the methods you see:

- **characterization:** the author's expression of a character's personality through the use of action, dialogue, thought, or commentary by the narrator or another character.
- **conflict:** the struggle within the story. Character divided against self, character against character, character against society, character against nature, character against God. Without it, there is no story.
- **dialogue:** vocal exchange between two or more characters. One of the ways in which plot, character, action, etc. are developed.
- **imagery:** the collection of images within a literary work. Used to evoke atmosphere, mood, tension. For example, images of crowded, steaming sidewalks flanking streets choked with lines of shimmering, smoking cars suggests oppressive heat and all the psychological tensions that go with it.
- **point of view:** the vantage point from which the author presents action of the story. Who is telling the story? An all-knowing author? A voice limited to the views of one character? The voice and thoughts of one character? Does the author change point of view in the story? Why? Point of view is often considered the technical aspect of fiction which leads the critic most readily into the problems and meanings of the story.
- **symbol:** related to imagery. It is something which is itself yet stands for or means something else. It tends to be more singular, a bit more fixed than

* *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* (7th ed.) and the *MLA Style Manual and Guide to Scholarly Publishing* (3rd ed.)

imagery. For example, in Lessing's "A Woman on a Roof," the brief red sun suit seems to symbolize the woman's freedom and independence from externally imposed standards of behavior.

- **tone:** suggests an attitude toward the subject which is communicated by the words the author chooses. Part of the range of tone includes playful, somber, serious, casual, formal, ironic. Important because it designates the mood and effect of a work.

Source: Online Writing Lab at Perdue University
<https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/>