English: Writing about Literature*

Literary studies, most would agree, is the core of the academic discipline of English. At its heart lays the close examination, most often through scholarly writing, of texts written throughout the many literary periods (from the early modern/Renaissance, Victorian, Modern, Postmodern and many others). The goal of such study varies depending on the kinds of questions the scholar is interested in exploring and has come to encompass such diverse (yet connected) issues and themes as colonialism and post-colonialism, race, gender, and identity, and culture. Using these questions, literary scholars work to deepen our understanding of literary texts and the many dimensions to human experience that these texts work to illuminate. The kinds of classes you will have and study you will do with literature are seemingly limitless: early modern identity and the impact of print culture through Renaissance literature, comparative authorial studies, race and ethnicity in contemporary American literature (or historically), exploring the birth of science and "modernity" or feminism through literature, the literature of colonial encounter, the goals and impact of a particular literary movement (the Harlem Renaissance or cyber-punk/sci-fi literature, for instance). Though the sheer breadth of possibilities for study makes it hard to generalize about specific writing assignments you may encounter, we hope this page of tips can help you become familiar with and confident about general strategies and tools for writing about literature, as well as some common types of literary analysis papers, no matter the topic or lens.

*__Note:__ other kinds of writing found in English classes, such as the personal essay, are not the primary focus here. See English: Creative Writing)

A Guide for Beginners

For many college students, their first English paper can be a daunting task. Being asked to closely analyze a text and pull out a broader meaning presents a unique challenge to those unfamiliar with the task. Often the advice – pick a theoretical approach, do a close reading, avoid over-summarizing – can be counterproductive and confuse writers even more. Below is a beginners' guide to writing that pesky paper for an introductory English literature class.

Brainstorm: Going against the grain

- Start with how you feel – Did you enjoy the reading? Was it entertaining? Why or why not? Most advanced English majors will tell you to avoid personal statements of like/dislike as if they were literary kryptonite. However, when you are trying to get the ball rolling, simply deciding how you feel about the text can be a useful exercise.

- Figure out why you feel it – Was it the imagery? Maybe it was the characters? Try your best to pinpoint specific elements of the text that caused your response to the text. Then go deeper. What words in the elements you singled out were particularly impactful? Again, why? By completing these steps, you are moving nearer to performing a close reading.

- Flip it – So you have specific textual examples supporting your response to the text. What now? Let's say you thought the book was entertaining because of its beautiful images, and the images were so beautiful because of the colors evoked. Well, now you flip it and lead with the powerful language and imagery. Structure your thesis around the impact of the imagery rather than your personal feeling. But the personal feelings served as an important starting point in coming up with a topic.

Writing the essay

- Keep it simple – Remember the five paragraph essay that was drilled into you during high school? You can do that. Start with an introductory paragraph telling the reader where the paper is going. Then follow with three pieces of evidence supporting your thesis. Make sure to make an argument. Your thesis is a claim that must be fought for and proven to be valid. Finally, wrap it all up with a conclusion that summarizes the points you made. But also keep in mind that the five paragraph essay is simply a template. You may have more/less pieces evidence and more/less than five paragraphs, but the intro – body – conclusion arrangement is the key.

- Use quotes/paraphrases – The text is your friend. Make sure you back your claims up with quotes or paraphrases. If you make a claim that can't be supported by pointing to a paragraph in the text, you should ditch the claim. Also, a good use of quotes shows the professor you actually read the book, which is always a plus.

- Have someone read what you wrote – Hand your essay to a friend, or bring it in to the Writing Center. Having an extra set of eyes look at your work can help avoid errors ranging from typos to unclear argumentation.

Friendly General Guide

Writing in English, English in Writing
(a friendly guide to writing literature papers)

English papers take on a variety of forms. They range from personal essays, to poetry, to critical analyses, to guides like this one. This particular writing guide will concentrate on English papers that are literature-based. It is important to keep in mind, though, that some of the keys to writing a good literary analysis also apply to writing a good poem or personal essay. Since there is no single, specific formula for writing an English paper, it is really your responsibility as a writer to decide how to employ these general strategies. But this is enough introduction; let's begin.

Reading:

It is incredibly difficult to write a paper about something you haven't read. In fact, it is nearly impossible. And it is completely impossible to write a *good* paper about something you haven't read. So the first step in writing a literary analysis or critique is to read the material about which you intend to write. That seems simple enough, but reading is actually a complicated process, Here are a few reading tips:

1. **Ask questions**. In his book *The Working Writer*, Toby Fulwiler writes, "Ask questions of a text from the moment you pick it up" (17). Even simple questions, like "What does the title suggest," or "What is the point-of-view" will help shape your reading and allow you to read more carefully.

2. Make sure you **understand what's going on**. You cannot interpret/analyze/critique anything you do not understand. Read for content. Before you do anything else, get the point.

3. **Respond** to the text. Fulwiler also stresses the need to develop an early response to a text. He says that it might be a good idea to even *"respond"* or "talk back" to the text in writing (19). Make notes, keep a reading journal, or draw pictures; just respond.

4. **Review** the text. Would you feel confident performing brain surgery after one reading of a surgical guide? I doubt it. After you make your initial response to a text, look at the text again. You may find new evidence to support an argument-in-progress, or you might find a completely new idea. In any case, your understanding of the text will improve and that's important.

Getting Started:

With a lot of English essays, beginning is more than half the battle. A good start leads to a good introduction, and a good introduction leads to a flowing paper, and a flowing paper leads to ... well, you get the point. Starting is tough because it can set the whole tone of your writing experience. But there are some different strategies for a good beginning:

1. **Summarize**. In *Writing, Processes and Intentions*, Richard Gebhart writes that "sometimes writer's block can be cured by writing" (202). While it is a *very* good idea to avoid summary in English papers themselves, it is sometimes helpful to create a summary for your own benefit. This will not only reinforce your reading, but it will get you writing.

2. **Try other strategies**. Brainstorm. Make maps. Outline. Whatever. Just start writing *something.* (When I get stuck, I tape xerox paper all over my walls and make six-foot outlines of ideas-in-progress. I also write first drafts in crayon. It really works.)

3. **Get yourself a thesis**. English papers are, for the most part, thesis-driven. A thesis is more or less a statement of purpose that sums up your main, bare bones argument. Keep your thesis simple and clear, and try to limit it to a few sentences. Remember that it is not always necessary to state your thesis directly in your paper. You can imply a thesis, but you must have a thesis. If you have difficulty developing a thesis, write out the phrase "What I want to say in this paper is ... " on a piece of paper and try to finish it.

4. **Write a wacky introduction**. One common misconception about introductions to English papers is that they must be seven to ten sentences of dry outline ending in a thesis. This is not always true. If your professor seems game, try something different. Open with a strange sentence, or an anecdote, or a lie. **__Note__: Do not be creative for the sake of creativity. Your introduction must have something to do with your paper, and it must make your objective clear. The trick is to balance the interesting with the functional. You'll have to play around until you hit on something useful.

5. **Title, title, title**. A tutor once wrote an eight page paper on a subject she was not initially interested in simply because she came up with a good title for it. She found that once she developed the idea in her title, she became interested. So, don't knock titles. Make sure they're *catchy as well as informative.*

6. **Start in the Middle.** If you can't figure out how to start your paper, then start somewhere else! Perhaps you have some good quotes you want to write about, or a couple of good examples to analyze. Do this. Once you get writing, everything else may fall into place. By beginning to write, you may be able to figure out your thesis and write a great introduction as well.

7. **Talk.** You probably have an idea of what you want to say but don't know how to put it in writing. Try explaining what you want to say to a friend. If no one is around, talk out loud to yourself. This will help you figure out what you want to say, and also help you clear up parts that are unclear in your head.

The Body:

No, I'm not talking about that Stephen King novella; I'm talking about that big middle section of your paper. You know, the one that follows your magnificent opening? Try these ideas out:

1. **Be clear**. In *Writing in the Disciplines,* Kennedy writes that "one aim of literary criticism ... is to make the meaning of…texts more accessible to us" (594). After you write your paper, read it aloud, or have someone else read it. Listen. Make sure that your points follow from one another and that your sentences are clear and understandable.

2. **Use quotes**. One way to increase your clarity is to quote your sources. Well-placed, clearly explained quotes give you credibility and make your points more solid. *Note: Never just throw a quote onto the page without providing an explanation. Always help your quotes out. Place them in context.

3. **Evidence.** Quotes are not the only form of evidence. You can also paraphrase and mention specific examples from the plot. In addition to this, consider writing about imagery, symbolism, diction, and other writing techniques the author may use.

4. **Analysis.** After you write about a certain type of evidence, you must analyze it to show how it supports your thesis. This is the part where you will show why the evidence you picked is important. Remember that although you know what you are trying to say, your reader does not. Using evidence and then analyzing it will form the entirety of your body paragraphs. Once you have written your paragraphs, go back over each sentence and try to define them as either evidence or analysis. If you have written something that does not fit into either category, it is probably unnecessary.

5. **Make sure your paper follows** your introduction or vice-versa. If you find out after finishing your paper that you have written about something other than what is in your introduction, you may need to alter your introduction. That's okay; do it.

6. **Play with form**. Not all essays are eight paragraphs and not all begin with a thesis and end with a conclusion. Experiment. Some papers work well as poems, and some work even better as intro-body-conclusion papers. Try to hit on a form that matches your style, so your paper's shape will add to your argument.

The End:

This is the way the paper ends.
This is the way the paper ends.
This is the way the paper ends.
Not with a whimper but a bang.

This isn't exactly what T.S. Eliot wrote, but it'll do. One common misconception about conclusions is that they must summarize the paper's main points and restate the introduction. This is not always true. Like voice and form, conclusions can be professor-dependent. Find out what your professor expects; they will often tell you right up front. Sometimes it is good to use your conclusion to ask a new question, or to move in a new direction. Sometimes you can even conclude that there is no conclusion. And in some arguments, the conclusion is actually the thesis. So, play around with your ending like you did with your beginning. Remember, it is the last thing your reader will see, so try to keep up a good energy level and keep readers interested. (Some professors insist that the conclusion do nothing more than summarize the paper. If this happens, you'll have to rely on interesting language instead of impressive new content.)

So what?

If you are still having trouble writing a conclusion, try answering the question “So what?” Usually your thesis will answer this question, but then ask yourself why your thesis is important. Take your paper a step further.

Revision:

In a 1981 writing guide entitled *Until I See What I See*, Karen Burke and Mary Jane Dickerson write that "inexperienced writers think that revision is largely cosmetic" (83). Unfortunately, or maybe fortunately, revision entails more than simple error-fixing. Revision means rethinking, readjusting, and rewriting. Here are a few tips:

1. **Don't get attached** to your drafts. Paragraphs don't bleed; it's okay to cut them. Free yourself up to delete anything that detracts from your main argument or point.

2. **Allow yourself plenty of time**. Don't try to write a final draft quality paper in one sitting. (A teacher once advised that you should have at least eight hours of sleep between draft writing and revision.)

3. **Get help**. It's tough to work on your writing alone because *you* know what *you* mean. So get a fresh opinion if possible.

4. **Move.** Get up, walk around, drink tea, take a shower, toss a ball against a wall…Do something to get out of your usual routine. People often say that their best ideas come to them at unexpected times. So switch things up and you might be surprised at the new ideas you come up with.

Editing and Proofreading:

At the end of your writing process, you can work on sentence-level errors, diction, punctuation, and spelling. Again, give yourself time between revision and editing. And get someone else to help you. *__Note__: Spell-checkers are good, but they are not always adequate. Run your own human spell-check.

Citation:

Just briefly I'd like to mention the fact that English papers generally require MLA style citation. This citation style uses in-text citation (like the page numbers I've given in parentheses above), instead of footnotes. It also uses a Work's Cited page instead of or as well as a bibliography. You can find a brief guide to MLA citation rules and examples on this page and in any good writing handbook.

Works Cited:

Burke, Karen and Mary Jane Dickerson. *Until I See What I See.* UVM Publication, 1981. Print.

Fulwiler, Toby. *The Working Writer.* New Jersey: Simon & Shuster, 1995. Print.

Gebhart, Richard. *Writing, Processes and Intentions.* Washington: D.C. Heath and Company, 1989. Print.

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Constructing an Argument about Literature

The root of writing about literature is the crafting of an argument about a text(s) relevant to the kind of study you are doing. This involves reading differently than you might read for pleasure, developing a thesis based on that reading, understanding how to organize your argument (the "five paragraph template"), and knowing which theoretical approach may be appropriate for the kind of question(s) you are asking/study you are doing. We hope these tips help as you craft your argument. Once you've crafted your argument and written a draft, you can often dramatically improve your paper through revising at the global, paragraph, and sentence levels.

Reading for Literary Analysis: Some Strategies

Reading anything with the intent to analyze or study it requires you to read in a somewhat different way than you might if you were just reading for pleasure. Literary texts are no different. Here are some tips and strategies for getting the most out of your reading:

Read fully. Skimming and reading Spark notes are the same thing: they both will give you an idea of basic plot happenings (maybe) but in no way capture the essence of the text (dialogue, narrative, nuanced details, etc.). Without these elements it is basically impossible to study a text; it will be like watching clips of a sports game and then trying to give an accurate and critical analysis/commentary on the game as a whole—something is just *missing*, and often times the key to literary analysis is the close attention to these details of the story that skimming cannot provide.

Read carefully. If you were like many of us and read the *Harry Potter* series growing up, then you know what it is like reading a book in a matter of hours. But if you were to study *Harry Potter* critically, that kind of speed reading could actually hinder you. Be sure you spend *time* with the text and really pay attention to what you are reading.

Reading lightning fast is good if you just can't wait to know what happens next (and you are reading for fun), but reading for academic study requires you to slow down, take things in, and *think* while you read. Literary analysis is about so much more than the plot of the book (although plot is one important part), and you want to come out of your reading having carefully thought about the text in terms of the themes of the class and class discussions so you are prepared with ideas when you sit down to write your analysis.

Give yourself plenty of time. Trying to cram your reading into the hour before class just won't cut it for most of us. Besides rushing yourself (which takes away from actually enjoying the text), you probably will not have enough time to take in the text and think about it critically. This can hurt your ability to participate in class discussions and make connections/arguments that might be useful in a paper.

Go back to the text. Studying literature means that one reading probably will not be enough. This is not to say that you must re-read the entire novel (realistically, there is no time). However, you will need to go back to certain sections and *work* with them in order to craft an argument, come up with discussion questions, or make complex connections between different parts of the text (for instance, a part in the beginning with a small part at the end). This is why leaving yourself time is important.

Post-it notes (or pens) are your friends. Likewise, in order to go back and re-read/work with the text as noted above, it could be helpful to keep notes. If you can't bear the thought of writing in your book, post-its are very handy to keep track of passages you have questions about, think are important, and want to respond to immediately so you do not lose your thoughts about them. Make connections to class discussions, connect different parts of the text, and keep track of it all (and make your book colorful). When you go to craft an argument about the text, having those notes will save you time and remind you of your brilliant insights.

Ask questions (out loud and in your head/on the page). Be sure to bring your thoughts to each class so you can clear up anything you are confused about and also engage more fully with the text. Likewise, ask questions of the text as you read (and make note of them and your responses). This will help you "connect the dots" both within a single text and between several texts and start forcing you to see not just each text in isolation, but how close and critical study and understanding of one text can help you in your analysis of others—especially when you are looking at texts as part of a class theme (colonial literature, say). Asking questions will help you develop ideas that allow you to explore how texts are related, which is very valuable (and necessary) when it comes time to write an analysis that deals with more than one text.

The technique of close/active reading is essential to this process as well. Be sure to check out that part of the page for further reading tips and strategies.

Thesis Statements

Your thesis statement is basically the "what" of your paper. It is not just a summary of your topic, but instead lays out what it is you are arguing about your topic. For example, a paper for a colonial literature class that must use two novels read during the semester to explore how the idea of "America" was constructed (**the topic**) might argue that close study of both Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative* and Winkfield's *The Female American* reveals that both texts construct America as a "melting pot," extolling problematic ideas of cultural assimilation as necessary and beneficial (**a thesis**—one of many possible ones depending on what the writer chooses to focus on, argue, and substantiate).

> A thesis is **arguable**.
>
> A thesis is (99.9% of the time) **not** just a statement of fact (or of your general topic).
>
> The key here is that you are providing an insight about the literature and then using close reading and analysis to *substantiate* and *support* that insight. This is the core of literary criticism and analysis.

Tips for Finding A Thesis (with Thelma)

Step 1: Read (carefully and critically) For A Possible Topic

In the same way that a college application expresses the work you did in high school, a paper should express the work you did while reading. If you feel like you have lots of ideas after reading, move on to the next step.

On the other hand, you may have to read the book and feel a bit lost about where to go next. At this point, there are few options. The first is to ask yourself honestly if you did a decent reading. If you haven't read carefully or thoughtfully, you might consider rereading or skimming all or part of the text. You should linger over the parts that confused you most. Scribble your questions in the margins, and then try to answer them.

If you've read closely but are having trouble thinking critically about what you read, you might try reading some of the scholarship around the literature to get started. Book reviews can be helpful, as can scholarly criticism pieces and even other texts in the author's canon.

Thelma just read Anna Karenina, Tolstoy's novel about a woman in Russia in the 19th century who betrays her husband. She tried to pay attention to the themes and the author's style. To supplement her reading, she decides to read some professional criticism around the novel to see what scholars are talking about in this novel.

Step 2: Brainstorm (and Trust Your Instincts) about How to Enter the Text

This is the key step in finding a topic. Consider elements of literary analysis: motifs (recurring symbols), personality traits of characters, turning pints in the plot, who narrates the text and what it contributes, the writing style of the author, the historical context of the book, the way the text begins and the way it ends, etc.

Once you've found a topic that interests you, you can brainstorm ideas about those topics. For example, if you decide that a recurring symbol you've noticed seems important to analyze, think of how it is conveyed throughout the text, where it usually comes up, and what is could mean given its context in the text and how/when it appears.

Here are a few tips to start the brainstorming process:

- Have a conversation. Taking to a writing center tutor, a friend, or your professor is a great way to get started. Tell this person where your instincts have led you. Speaking your ideas out loud and having them questioned will help you critically analyze your own thoughts, find holes in your arguments and also where you have a solid understanding/support for that argument.

- Make a list. Listing is another great way to narrow possibilities. You can make a list of anything: topics, possible arguments and support for them—whatever works for you.

- Critically Reflect: Some writers find that just ruminating on the text helps them come up with their best ideas. If this is your style, go for it. Thinking—especially while paging through the text—is a great way to brainstorm ideas.

You should care about your topic. Otherwise, your paper will feel like a chore. Even if you don't know what particularly you plan to argue about your topic (your eventual thesis), trust your instincts on where to head. What jumped out at you? What parts did you like? What parts were challenging or confusing or seemed strange to you? What characters did you find fascinating? What symbols were intellectually provoking? The most interesting place for you is where you should start.

Thelma really loves the author's voice. She feels Tolstoy's narrative style added a lot to the novel. She decides to make a list of ideas relating to Tolstoy's narrative voice, paying attention to patterns. The omniscient narrator is able to see into every single character's mind and hear every conversation. The narrator has a powerful ability for physical description. Also, the narrator often makes blanket statements such as the assertion in the first paragraph that "al happy families are alike." After making her list of observations relating to narrative voice, she is ready for step four.

Step 2 ½ : Go back to the Text

Going back to the text is crucial during this process. Don't just brainstorm, but brainstorm while you actually refer back to the parts of a text that interest you. By doing this, you will get

yourself in tune with finite details of the text that may become important as you begin to craft your argument. Write down some notes and page numbers so these ideas are easy to find later.

Thelma likes her observation that the narrator often issues opinions in the form of fact, such as "All happy families are the alike." She goes back to the text and writes down many instances where the narrator employees this tactic, along with the page numbers.

Step 3: Think of Something You Can Argue about Your Topic

Now you can begin to shape your observations about your topic into an arguable point (a THESIS). Some writers accomplish this by sitting down and starting to write based on their observations—that's perfectly fine! Others like to come up with their argument by thinking and planning before they begin writing. Regardless of when you actually do it, the goal here is to take the things you have been observing and thinking about and craft an argument about them. Two questions that might help you start: WHAT are you observing and WHAT function does it serve in the text?

Thelma asks herself, "why does the narrator say these arguable statement as fact? What function does it serve?" She thinks the narrator could say these arguable statements as fact for many reasons: to provide artificial confidence in the narrator, to make the reader confused, to set a particular tone in the novel. Ultimately, she decides that the idea that seems most important or arguable is that these statements confuse the reader. Then she asks herself what function this narrative style might serve.

Step 4: Start Writing in Some Way (if you haven't already done so)!

For some people, this is the hardest part. If you have a preliminary thesis, *start writing*. This will serve the same function as having a conversation during the brainstorming process: it will help you really get into your ideas and figure out what is working and what make more sense in tour head but seems to have some holes in it.

If you are still not sure what you want to argue, *start writing* for the same reasons. By diving in and really working with the material that you have so far, you are sure to begin gaining insights and noticing things you didn't before. The act of writing (just like talking through our ideas) helps us get them in order in our own heads and thus helps us more fully develop and revise them.

Note: you don't have to start writing your *essay* per se. Instead, do what works best for you: lists, organizers, outlines, charts with all your ideas (and maybe some observations from the text that go with them), free writes, anything. The point here is that you have to work with your topic and observations (and the text) in order to figure out what you can (and want) to argue based on them.

Thelma sits down, takes a deep breath, and puts her pen to paper (or her fingers to the keyboard).

Step 5: Keep Tweaking (and thinking) and Going Back to the Text

Constructing a college-level argument (and thus a thesis) is not always easy. In fact, if you found it easy perhaps you should take a second look at what you are arguing! Writers and scholars (like you and your professors) rarely start out with a thesis that they consider perfect or with which they feel wholly satisfied. As you are writing and engaging with your textual evidence and your ideas themselves, you may find that your original thesis doesn't not hold up as well as you thought. You may find you need to add or change something based on what you have begun thinking about or noticing. Go for it. That is the name of the game. Do not come up with a thesis beforehand and *then* go into the text to support it. Your argument must come from careful work with the text and will probably (should) change as you go.

Thelma is mostly satisfied with her thesis, but wants to tweak one part of it based on new ideas she has begun thinking about as she writes and continues to think about the text and her argument: instead of general confusion, she wants to focus on the idea of questioning formally unquestioned truths. She notices that as a reader, she has been questioning Tolstoy's narrator's "factual" statements all along (not just assuming they are fact). She also realizes that Anna Karenina does this as well, one example being when she questions the morality of leaving her son whom she was once more attached to than anyone, another being when she questions the farness of the bourgeois society that she once trusted. Thelma sees lots of examples of characters questioning their formally unquestioned worldviews and she plans to argue in her paper that the narrative voice reproduces this effect in the reader, reflecting and reinforcing the mental state of the characters. She also notes that a future paper that takes this topic even further might explore the importance of this questioning in the historical context of the text (perhaps a good thing to nod towards in her conclusion).

Steps 1-5: Don't Ignore Contradictory Evidence

Although it is important to find evidence that supports your thesis, there may be parts of the text, or even context surrounding the text itself, that do not fit or that seem to contradict your argument. Although a re-evaluation of this evidence may lead you towards a revised thesis, it does not necessarily have to. Ask yourself: why did I interpret the text in this way? What might this contradictory evidence suggest about my thesis?

DO NOT IGNORE THIS KIND OF EVIDENCE. Just because it may not support your argument does not mean that you can pretend it does not exist; it is still a part of the text that you are studying and just ignoring it makes your argument null (you will be misrepresenting the text in order to make your own argument "work"—kind of like forging data in an experiment in order to ensure that your hypothesis is supported).

Remember:

- Providing your reader with contradictory/opposing evidence gives you the chance to rebut it. This can only strengthen your argument; if you are able to come up with ways to explain how the evidence, in fact, does not ruin your argument, you are showing the

reader (and yourself) that what you are arguing is strong and well supported. Poking holes in your own argument and then demonstrating how those holes do not undermine what you are arguing is a classic argumentative strategy.

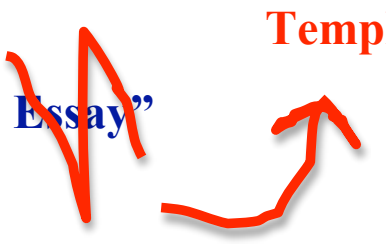
- Incorporating evidence that complicates your argument is also helpful, even if it poses problems for what you are arguing. No argument/thesis is always clear-cut or perfect—that is why it is called an *argument* and not a *fact*. Make sure that you do not present yours as fact, as this will only weaken your position to readers.

- Sometimes the opposing evidence complicates your argument too much—i.e. it is useless to argue against it because clearly your argument cannot be supported strongly enough. This happens all the time in scholarship, be it in the humanities, social sciences, or physical/biological sciences—it is a GOOD thing (this is how progress is made). Don't get too attached to your thesis, be open to tweaking (step 5 above) and in the end you will come out with a thesis that is strong, coherent and well supported.

Organizing Your Argument: How Does it “Tick”?

Secret Revealed:
The "Five Paragraph Essay"

[That's it??]



The academic discipline of English is very heavily based on scholarly argumentative, thesis driven writing (as most disciplines are). However, it is the study of literature that has classically lent itself to and gone hand-in-hand with writing instruction in the academic imagination. As such, most high schoolers get bombarded with the "five paragraph essay" format in their English classes, misinterpreted as *the* standard to which effective, thesis-driven writing holds itself. These students quickly discover that this simply is not the case and will not cut it at the college level and beyond.

So why learn it? We hope this guide will help you understand what this model is **NOT**, but more importantly what it **IS** and how it should be used to help you better understand the complex inner working of effective academic writing.

IS

- A Template
- A Way of Thinking about Writing Structurally
- A Model to Help You Plan/Organize Your Flow of Ideas
- A Sketch
- One of Many Techniques

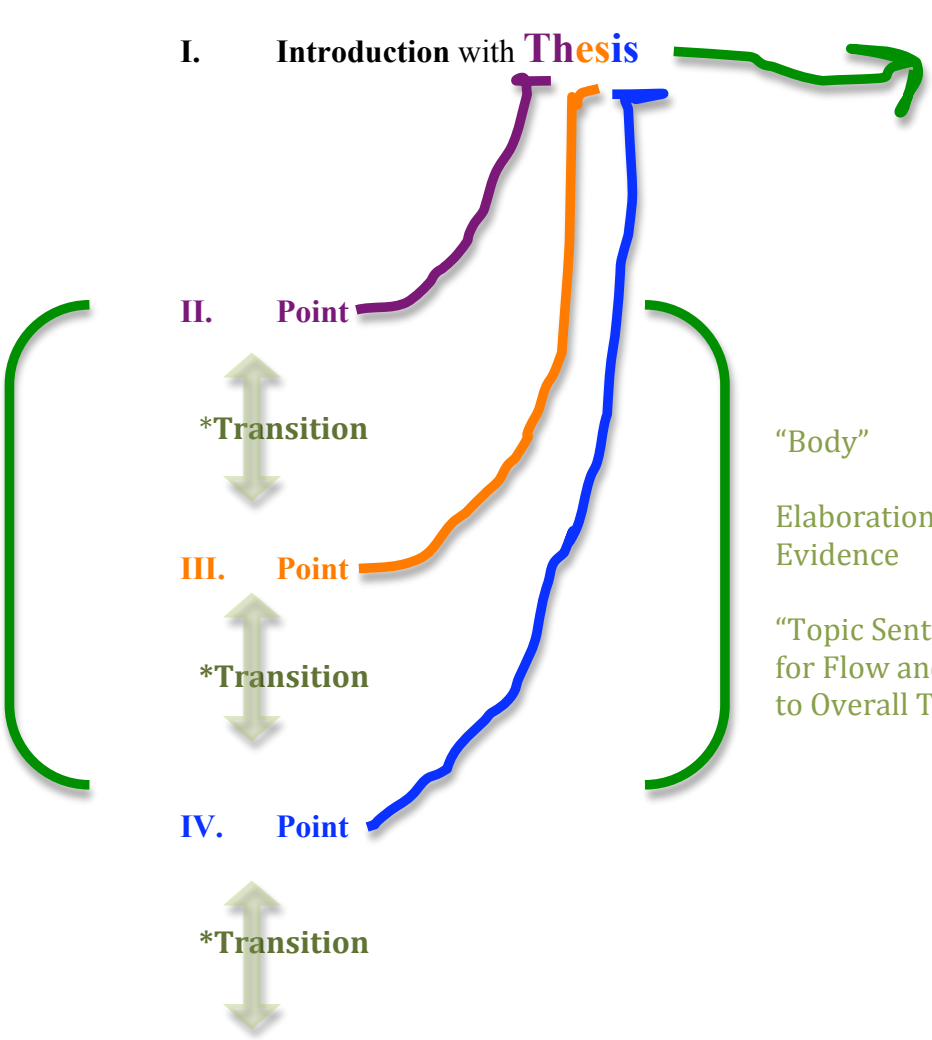
NOT

- *The* Template
- *The* Way of Thinking about Writing Structurally
- "The Right" Model that You Should Always Use
- Picasso 101
- The Holy Grail

❖ In a nutshell, the five-paragraph essay is all about **understanding form**—it is ***not a form*** in and of itself.

We are going to break it down for you so you can see it for what it is…no more of this "man behind the curtain." Just like the people of OZ discovered that their wizard was just a man, so too one of the best discoveries you can make as an academic writer is that this "magical A+ formula" is really just an ordinary tool in your toolbox: it is only magical if understood and used correctly by a writer willing to put in the effort to do so. Otherwise, the only thing it produces is writing that is bland and, well, "muggle-like" (i.e. not collegiate status). And most importantly, you will limit yourself and miss the chance to fully engage critically with the material and your understanding of it.

So, this is what it looks like broken down:



[Not just a statement of your topic or points about that topic, but a statement of **what you are arguing *about your topic***. *Think: road map of your writing for the reader (and you, the writer, as you write!)]*

"Body"

Elaboration of Thesis-Argument Points with Evidence

"Topic Sentences/Transitions Between Ideas for Flow and to Logically Connect Ideas Back to Overall Thesis

[Not just re-hashing what you've said before, but **talking holistically about your topic based on what you've argued**. *This is your chance to tie everything together and leave your reader thinking about your argument as a whole (unlike in the introduction, where the reader has not yet encountered your explanation, elaboration, and evidence for what you are arguing. Perhaps suggest the implications of your argument, or suggest where further study needs to be done. However you choose to conclude, leave your reader thinking.]*

- This **is** how basic academic (and certainly literary criticism) writing "ticks."

- This **is not** the form you must follow every time.

- This **is** a great way to understand how the different parts of your writing should link up and function with one another, no matter what form you choose to use.

Use this model **not** to box yourself in and make everything fit into five paragraphs (this is, for the most part, impossible to do with information at this point in your academic career), but **to get an idea of how the parts of your essay work together to give your reader (and, in many ways, as you are writing it, yourself) your argument**. How you do that is up to you. You may end up with three main parts of your argument. Maybe you have one. Maybe seven. Maybe your introduction is two paragraphs long. Maybe you need five paragraphs to fully explain and substantiate (with evidence) five sub-points to your first argument point and then just one for the other two. The point is that no matter how you as the writer decide to organize, this model can help you keep things structured, connected, and "ticking."

- Remember: the writing center is a great place to come if you want help figuring out the best way to organize your essay.

Brief Overview of Major Theoretical Paradigms

Once you have a framework for your argument (and it is not always necessary to explicitly state it…in fact, most times you will not—it is just a way to get your thoughts organized and give some context to your argument), you're well on your way to writing a strong paper.

Remember: which paradigm might be appropriate (or even possible to use) depends on the kinds of questions you are asking of a text(s), which in turn depends on your particular class (and particular writing assignment) e.g., if you are in a postmodernism class and looking at how a particular text reflects the greater social anxieties/concerns of its 1970s context, a New Critical approach is not appropriate or possible). Always be clear about your professor's expectations.

Hopefully this quick overview can help get your thoughts together:

- **New Criticism** started in the 1930s in the United States. It focuses on removing a work from its historical context and judging it solely on the words we have in front of us. The technique of close reading arose from this movement. While it has the benefit of allowing us to interpret a work without anything" extra," some critics argue that historical and personal context is important to fully understanding a work.

- **Phenomenology** began in the early 20th century with philosopher Edmund Husserl. It dismisses notions of objectivity, certainty, and totality and instead asks readers to explain the world as it is presented uniquely to them.

- **Structuralism** was established in the 1950s primarily by a group of French intellectuals in direct opposition to phenomenology. The most prominent literary structuralists are Ferdinand de Saussure and Roland Barthes. Structuralism focuses on how signs and signifiers interact to create meaning, and what that means for various cultures. Once it was believed to be impossible to come up with a universal conclusion, the post-structuralists emerged - touting the values of structuralism while dismissing totality, and therefore embracing some phenomenological subjectivity.

- **Deconstructionism (post-structuralism)**, founded largely by Jacques Derrida, evolved from structuralism. It aims to further clarify meaning by critiquing, blurring the lines between, and "teasing out" conceptual opposites-inside/ outside, mind/ body, literal/ metaphorical, speech/ writing, presence/absence, form/ meaning. To do this tries to prove not that the meanings of things are set in stone, but rather they are" constructed" by various systems. However, to deconstruct is not to destroy, but rather to make the deconstructed something's function clearer and richer.

- **Psychoanalysis** evolved from Jacques Lacan and the works of Sigmund Freud and uses a highly specific, highly technical vocabulary most commonly associated with psychology in an effort to discuss the self as a function of language. Based on the Freudian concept of *transference,* where one getting analyzed associates a role with the analyzer, meaning arises from the relationship, not necessarily the events tied to it.

- **Post-Colonialism** deals with increasing questions of Western hegemony since the 1980s. How are subjects, cultures and meanings affected by European and American imperialism?

- **Marxism**, derived from the writings of Karl Marx, focuses primarily on economic critique, often exploring how identity is related to social class.

- **Feminism**, in the strictest sense, aims to deconstruct the man/woman hierarchy by promoting women's rights and women's writings to offer a representation of an authentically female experience. In the school of French feminism, "woman" becomes synonymous with anything different from the norm - perhaps anything Other, as Simone de Beauvoir would say - to deal with the problems of patriarchal discourse.

- **Queer Theory** aims to discuss not only issues of sexuality and identity, but to expose and analyze anything thought perverse or marginalized—things commonly dismissed or not given enough credit—to further understand and enrich meaning.

- **Historicism**

Supporting Your Argument: A Lit Crit Toolbox

Once you have an argument you are excited about, its time to get writing (or maybe you already have)! This page is a collection of tips on using the various tools you have to support your argument: quoting and using textual evidence and the technique of close reading as well as some basic literary terminology you may find helpful to know.

Quoting and Using Textual Evidence in Literature Papers

- Using direct quotations is an important part of writing about literature.

- Think of quotations as **evidence** for your main point/argument.
  - If used correctly, quotations will make your argument stronger, but they cannot stand by themselves (i.e. the reader needs to know the evidence's purpose). For example, in a murder trial a piece of evidence might be a bloody rag. However, this evidence is useless unless it is clear whose rag it is, where it was found, and what it implies for the trial.
  - Make sure that readers know the **purpose** and **context** for every quotation in your piece.
  - **Introduce** each quotation and **draw a conclusion** from it. This conclusion must *relate to your thesis and thus connect to the main argument of your paper*.

- Alfred Rosa and Paul Eschholz, authors of *The Writer's Pocket Handbook* (2nd ed, Pearson Education, 2003), make the following suggestions:
  - "When you are considering using a quotation, ask yourself thee questions:
    - How well does the quotation illustrate or support my analysis?
    - Is this quotation the best evidence of the point I am making?
    - Why am I quoting the text instead of paraphrasing or summarizing it?" (169)

- Use **"signal phrases"** to **introduce** quotations and **integrate** them into the flow of your paper. Signal phrases tell the reader who is speaking and indicate where your ideas end and someone else's begin.
  - "Verbs that you should keep in mind when constructing signal phrases include the following (Rosa and Eschholz 168):

    - Acknowledges
    - Adds
    - Admits
    - Believes
    - Compares
    - Confirms
    - Declares
    - Endorses
    - Grants
    - Implies
    - Insists
    - Points out
    - Reasons
    - Reports
    - Responds
    - Suggest"

- Consider the following example:

    - McTeague, by Frank Norris, suggests that man's natural instincts are often evil in nature. Norris illustrates this in the scene when Trina is lying unconscious in McTeague's dentist chair. Suddenly McTeague is overcome with the urge to take advantage of her. He battles with his conscience but ultimately loses, unable to stop himself from kissing Trina on the mouth. "He could only oppose to it [the foul stream of hereditary evil] an instinctive stubborn resistance, blind, inert" (23).

- Now look at what happens when a **signal phrase is used** and a **conclusion is drawn**

    - McTeague, by Frank Norris, suggests that man's natural instincts are often evil in nature. Norris illustrates this in the scene when Trina is lying unconscious in McTeague's dentist chair. Suddenly McTeague is overcome with the urge to take advantage of her. He battles with his conscience, but ultimately loses, unable to stop himself from kissing Trina on the mouth. *Norris suggests that McTeague does not have the capability to reason with his impulse, that* "he could only oppose to it an instinctive stubborn resistance, blind, inert" (23). *Here, McTeague portrays sexual longing as something that needs to be controlled; it is an instinct that must be battled.*

- Observe how in the second example, the signal phrase introduces the quotation and integrates it into the body of the paragraph. Also, note how the author draws a conclusion from the quotation, relating it to the essay's main idea (this relates to doing close reading —a technique explored below.

- Although there is no rule against starting a sentence with a quotation, when learning how to incorporate quotations effectively you might want to avoid doing so. Starting a quotation mid-sentence often forces you to include a signal phrase; however, this is not always the case. Also, signal phrases are not always sufficient to provide the reader with the quotation's context so be sure to provide necessary background.

- In literature papers, too many quotations can distract readers from your argument. Use direct quotations only when the specific wording the author uses is essential to providing your analysis. A good trick is this: if you are unable to paraphrase the original wording without destroying the meaning/conclusion that you would like to draw from a particular quotation, then it is best to leave that quote as is.

- For the same reason, avoid using long (over four lines) quotations too frequently when you can simply mention them. Remember: in a literature papers you want to assume that the reader has already read the piece that you are writing about.

- When talking about ideas that do not necessarily require the direct quote, use paraphrasing instead (but still document where in the text this idea or situation is being discussed/occurring.

- In general, quote the least amount of the text that conveys the point you are trying to make.

- Make sure that you quote accurately. Copy the text and punctuation exactly as they appear in the source from which you are quoting. If you need to change a pronoun or the tense of a verb (or anything about the sentence) in order to integrate the quote into the flow of you paper, use brackets ([]) to indicate the changes you've made.

- Try not to get attached to any one quote. Even if it "sounds good," it may not be the best piece of evidence for your argument. Likewise, remember to not just ignore evidence that seems to go against what you are arguing (see our note on not ignoring contradictory evidence)

- It takes practice to be able to incorporate quotations effectively into a paper—work hard and keep at it!

Examples of quotations used as textual evidence in various types of literature papers:

1. Classic Literature Paper

> When Wright becomes interested in books, he describes struggling to fully concentrate due to the hunger gnawing at him. However, Wright also gains from his reading a new type of hunger; he describes, "But to feel that there were feelings denied me, that the very breath of life itself was beyond my reach, that more than anything else hurt, wounded me. I had a new hunger" (250). Similar to the limitations whites placed on black's education, hunger impedes Wright's intellectual capabilities. However, the knowledge Wright gains from his reading provides him with a drive for something more-a hunger to right wrongs. Thus, hunger challenges Wright's capability to read, but also encourages him to strive for something more.

Annotation: Be sure to explicate the quote, which means to reference back to it in the sentences following. Explain the quote's significance, its meaning, and how it ties into your argument. It may strengthen your paper to re-quote specific words or phrases out of the initial quotation as they pertain to your paper.

2. Comparative

> Faulkner portrays age in both pieces of work in a similar way. As Faulkner displays both Emily and the woman from the sketch, he alienates them from the rest of his characters and makes them appear lonely. In *A Rose for Emily*, Faulkner describes, "When we next saw Miss Emily, she had grown fat and her hair was turning gray. During the next few years it grew grayer and grayer until it attained an even pepper-and-salt iron-gray…from that time on her front door remained closed" (319). Faulkner assigns a negative connotation with Emily's

aging, making her appear less physically attractive. By having Emily become reclusive from the neighborhood, Faulkner also makes her appear unfriendly and antisocial. In *New Orleans Sketches*, as Faulkner describes the woman appearing young then suddenly old again, he says, "…her face became the face of a woman of sixty, toothless and merry as a gnome's. Her eyes were contemplative, yet personal-it was as if someone had whispered a sublime and colossal joke in the ear of an idol." Faulkner makes the woman's elderly face appear comical, clearly revealing his attitude towards women of an older age. Therefore, Faulkner keeps a consistently negative attitude towards women of an older age, as he portrays their aging physical features as exaggerated and comical.

Annotation: For comparative papers, it's important to directly relate the two quotes and interpret them individually. The purpose of such a paper is to create an essay comparing and/or contrasting two (or more) works of literature. Try drawing similarities in tone, style, or meaning. Relay to the reader the significance of these connections-what do they suggest about the author, message of the book, or general context?

3. Historical/Contextual Essay

In the collection of short stories *Lost in the City*, Jones uses D.C. to provide context for the reader. The first story in the collection, *The Girl Who Raised Pigeons*, is the account of a young girl, Betsy Ann, who raises pigeons with her father. As the story progresses, Betsy Ann describes feeling ostracized from her friends as they move to the other side of the city due to the building of a railroad track. Jones writes, "Gradually, as more people moved out of Myrtle Street, the room became less attractive for Betsey Ann to visit" (18)[1]. Jones uses the changing neighborhoods of D.C. to reflect a change in his characters. Through the shifting demographics of D.C., the reader gains insight into the feelings of Betsy Ann.

Annotation: In English classes, students are often asked to write research papers that consider the historical context of a given piece of literature. When writing such historical essays, look for quotations that reflect cultural/historical changes or events. When explicating your support, remember to remark upon the literary and historical significance of the quote. Elaborate on how the quotation ties in with the historical context of the book, and what it suggests about the dynamics of the time.

4. Personal Response Essay

In *Sula*, Morrison still holds the responsibility of speaking for a marginalized group as she did in her earlier novels. The story revolves around female black characters, and largely focuses on the dynamics of the relationship between two women: Sula and Nel. Morrison describes that the two girls discover, "that they were neither white nor male, and that all the freedom and triumph was forbidden to them, they had to set about creating something else to be" (52). I found this statement to be "touching" as it made me realize the limitations race forced on these girls. However, despite these constraints, both Sula and Nel had a rebellious nature-something that also "touched" and inspired me. I was interested in understanding the motives behind the women's angst, such as why Sula was driven to cut off her finger; however I struggled to do so. I think this is due to the fact that Morrison gives very little

context, thus making the reader struggle to grasp at a central meaning to the novel. I felt as though my role as a reader in *Sula* was to be an observer, rather than partake in any emotion. This feeling was actually articulated in the book, when Sula watched her mother burn. Morrison describes, "Sula had watched Hannah burn not because she was paralyzed, but because she was interested" (78). Thus, I was interested in the course of the events in the novel, but like Sula, I wasn't "moved" to spring into action.

Annotation: When supporting a personal response to a piece of literature, look for quotes that you can relate to. Think about your initial reaction to the quote, and then why you chose it. In your explication, explain your connection to the quote and its significance to you. Perhaps include personal anecdotes to support your point, or refer to your emotional connection to the piece.

[1] Jones, Edward P. Lost in The City. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1992. Print.

Tips for "Close Reading"

The technique of "close reading" comes out of the New Criticism movement of the 40s and 50s, a school of criticism that focused solely on the text and disregarded notions of authorial intent, historical/social context, or any other para-text. Close reading has since become a dominant tool of literary study regardless of the theoretical approach taken (New Criticism itself has faded from the forefront) and is, in truth, a valuable tool where any text, be it scholarly or non-academic, is concerned.

Here are some quick tips on how to do a "close reading" and how it fits into writing a literary analysis:

- Like the name suggests, it is a close (i.e. critical) reading of a text or part of a text. It is not a summary of what the text is saying, nor can it be fully described as simply an explaining of what the text means.

- Some people use the term "active reading" because it captures the essence of reading critically, not just passively and superficially (for face-value).

- In your writing, especially when quoting or using textual evidence (see the section on using textual evidence above), this means that the close reading will serve as a kind of debrief of the evidence, taking the quote or evidence apart, critically engaging with key aspects and weaving them into an analysis of how the evidence demonstrates your central argument.

- Close reading is integral to the process of incorporating textual evidence/quotes (see above) into your paper: **SET UP→QUOTE/EVIDENCE→DEBREIF** (close reading).

- Depending on the kind of study you are doing and the type of argument you are making, what you take from a close reading of a passage or a whole text will

obviously be different (e.g. someone in the field of post-colonial studies will be reading the text closely and looking for different things than one who is interested in exploring issues of racial and gender identity).

- Check out this example of a close reading of a passage from Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash* from a student essay that explores the novel through issues of postmodern understandings of technology and society and its critique of the "enlightenment":

Stephenson's society has fallen into an irreversible negative spiral: as society becomes turgid with technology, progress nears extinction. The material need for technology engenders a society that is well-equipped, but harmful:

With their power tools, portable generators, weapons, four-wheel-drive vehicles, and personal computers, the are chewing through the wilderness, building things and abandoning them, altering the flow of mighty rivers and then moving on because the place ain't what it used to be. The byproduct of this lifestyle is polluted rivers and greenhouse effect…but as long as you have that four-wheel-drive vehicle and can keep driving north, you can sustain it, keep moving just quick enough to stay one step ahead of your own waste stream (274).

Did the enlightenment actually enlighten *anybody*? If so, where are the sign of progress? Like many post-modern writers, Stephenson cannon understand how scientific and technological advances can bring progress to a society when *all technology does is destroy it*. Certainly, progress is not measured in how well it can "chew through the wilderness, build things and then abandon them." The Enlightenment has failed, according to Stephenson, because as Americans we continue "driving north…moving just quickly enough to stay one step ahead of our own waste stream," devouring every nook and cranny, ruining it with pernicious technology. True enlightenment brings "progress" or "advancement of humanity" (XI), not "polluted rivers and greenhouse effect.

This close reading interprets what Neal Stephenson is suggesting to the reader through this quote (and the particular critical lens being used by the writer), not simply what Stephenson is literally saying.

NOTE: The use of extensive quotes for evidence (like used in this example) is not required and is actually quite rare…the important part is the debrief that comes afterwards. Close reading involves critical analysis of any kind of evidence (usually a short quote(s), maybe even just a few words, integrated right into the close reading itself—remember that literary criticism and analysis is written assuming the reader has read the novel(s) under study). There are many ways to present evidence for close reading—you will work out methods that fit your style with practice.

- **SET UP→QUOTE/EVIDENCE→DEBREIF** (close reading).

Close reading can also be done on and used to illuminate stylistic devices and how they affect the text and its meaning (or reveal how the text is operating). Some examples of focus might be:

- Syntax, figurative language, diction, narrative voice
- Length of passage/how it is written
- How the information is presented and why the author might have chosen to present it in that way

Again, this technique is useful when reading any text. For instance, a close reading of a non-literary (and perhaps popular) text, like a newspaper or magazine article, can reveal how the text operates, how arguments are constructed, how the author is presenting the information and why, all helpful in assessing the text critically and being an active, critical reader by interrogating what you read. This allows you to form your own thoughts about the text and not just submit to what others say (sort of like the saying "don't believe everything you hear," we must also carefully evaluate what we read). And this clearly has use in the study and critique of literary texts in service of scholarship.

Basic Terms to Know

(All terms taken from Murfin, Ross and Supryia M. Ray. *The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms*. 2nd ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2003. Print. Refer to this text for hundreds more definitions)

Allegory: The presentation of an abstract idea through more concrete means. The typical allegory is a narrative…that has at least two levels of meaning[:]…the…surface-level story line…[and] a second and deeper level…which may be moral, political, philosophical, or religious. … (9).

Allusion: An indirect reference to a person, event, statement, or theme found in literature, the other arts, history, myths, religion, or popular culture. … (11).

Close Reading: The thorough and nuanced analysis of a literary text, with particular emphasis on the interrelationships among its constituent elements (allusions, images, sound effects, etc.). … (61).

Diction: Narrowly defined, a speaker's (or author's) word choice. The term may also refer to the general type or character of language used in speech or in a work of literature. …(108).

Genre: From the French *genre* for "kind" or "type," the classification of literary works on the basis of the content, form, or technique. …(189).

Imagery: A terms used to refer to: 1) the actual language that a writer uses to convey a visual picture (or, most critics would add), to create or represent any sensory experience); and 2) the use of figures of speech, often to express abstract ideas in a vivid and innovative way. …(210).

(Literary) Criticism: Reflective, attentive consideration and analysis of a literary work).

…(78).

Motif: A unifying element in an artistic work, especially any recurrent image, symbol, theme, character type, subject, or narrative detail. …(277).

Plot: The arrangement and interrelation of events in a narrative work, chosen and designed to engage the reader's attention and interest (or even to arouse suspense or anxiety) while also providing a framework for the exposition of the author's message, or theme, and for other elements such as characterization, symbol, and conflict. …(347).

Symbol: Something that, although it is of interest in its own right stands for or suggests something larger and more complex—often an idea or a range of interrelated ideas, attitudes, and practices. …(470).

Theme: Not simply the subject of a literary work, but rather a statement that the text seems to be making about that subject. …(479).

Revising

Revision, although at times seemingly arduous and redundant, is one of the most important steps in the writing process. It is the point at which you have the opportunity to look over what you have written as a reader and not a writer. This allows you to assess your work with the same objectivity that your professor will use when reading your paper. Through adopting an alternative perspective (namely, that of a reader), you are able to extend your work more conscientiously to your audience. This is a HUGE advantage in writing that is unfortunately overlooked by many students. In the following sections we will look at why revision is so important and what some of the best ways of practicing it are.

When revising, it is important to consider the process as having two levels: global concerns and local concerns. Below is a table of some of the concerns that constitute each level of revision.

Global concerns	Local concerns*
• A clear thesis statement • Organization/Structure • Coherence of work • Quality of evidence/support • Tone/Voice • How the work addresses its audience…etc.	• Spelling, Punctuation, Grammar • Formatting…etc. • Structure of a paragraph

It is always better to take a top down approach when it comes to revision (i.e. starting with global concerns before moving on to sentence-level revision). If you start revising with attention to minor details, you will realize that you have ignored the breadth of your paper. With this in mind, we will start by talking about how to identify and handle global concerns first before moving on to local concerns.

Global Concerns

Above is a short list of global concerns, but it isn't nearly exhaustive. An easy way to think of what constitutes global concerns is to consider anything that affects the paper as a whole, rather than in one particular spot. Meaning is the most important part of any piece of writing, and it is the way in which you communicate meaning that will ultimately shape the impressions of your paper.

The establishment of meaning requires two roles: someone who is trying to convey it and someone who is trying to comprehend it. That is why revision is such a vital process: it enables the writer to re-vision what they have written from the other end, as the audience, and through adopting this new perspective secure the meaning and intent of their work.

Here are some strategies to help gain this perspective:

Revision Strategies

- **Allow time between drafts**
  This will help you establish some distance from what you have written, and allow you to reread with fresh perspective.

- **Clear your mind**
  You have to realize your mental capacity for any given task; over-exerting often leads to undesirable outcomes. Clearing your mind (e.g. by changing tasks, taking a break etc.) gives you time to regain the mental vigor needed to actively engage with an assignment. Again, this will give you the fresh perspective which is so often strained by unduly exertion.

- **Have others read what you have written**
  The best way to gain perspective is by actually getting other perspectives. It is often hard for writers to share what they have written but this is one of the most valuable resources in developing as a writer. Be sure to take advantage of the perspectives of others, and remember to always be open when receiving feedback.

- **Read aloud**
  This will help you hear your words outside the confines of your internal-voice. Writing was born from the oral tradition, and you must keep in mind that in writing, like oratory, communication is central. Hearing your words spoken aloud will help you develop an ear keen on making sure that your sentences are both eloquent and that their meaning is communicable.

- **Gloss**
  Glossing is an invaluable strategy in revision. To gloss you read through every paragraph in your paper individually, writing a brief marginal note which summarizes each. When you are finished, you should be able to write each small summary down in a list to create what looks like an outline (you might call this a reverse outline). By looking at this list, you will be able to address any major issues with structure in a way that detaches you from the labor you have put into your prose. Look at the outline as if you had created it before starting to write: does it make sense as a way to approach the assignment?

- **Compare to a template**
  If provided, it is always good to compare what you have written to a template. Of course, everyone has their own style of writing, and there is no one way to approach an assignment, but since your professor has most likely given you the template because it is an exemplary approach, it is a good idea to see what you can learn from comparing it to what you have written.

- **Be Objective**
  The most important thing to note in all of these strategies is that each requires some level of objectivity. If you are too invested in your own words, then you will not be able to effectively communicate their meaning to others. A good piece of writing lets the audience share its ownership and that means sharing its words as well. Always keep your audience in mind when writing.

Revising your thesis

Many people are reluctant to change their thesis once they have established it. Yes, a thesis is the foundation on which a work rests, but that does not mean that altering it will make the whole work fall in on itself. Many writers avoid confronting contradictory evidence, or anything that might cast doubt over their paper, because they are afraid that it will require them to alter their thesis. Contradictory evidence is the key to any good paper. A good literary paper is supported by the argument behind it, and you cannot have an argument without something to argue against (i.e. contradictory evidence). If you run into evidence which you think your thesis cannot standup against, don't avoid it, but see how you can tweak your thesis to accommodate or better refute that evidence.

Local Concerns

Once you feel that you have addressed the global concerns (i.e. you have a paper presented in such a way that its argument is evident, well-constructed, and representative of both your intent as its writer and the expectations of the prompt), you can begin to revise on the sentence-level. The best way to address these concerns is to analyze each sentence looking at: syntactical structure, grammar, punctuation, voice (e.g. formal/informal)…etc. We will not go over each of these, but I strongly encourage you to use resources such as the Writing Center or the Purdue OWL if you have any questions about sentence-level revision.

Below is a link to the Purdue OWL's webpage for "General Writing Resources." In it you will find everything you need to know if you have questions about: grammar, punctuation,

mechanics…etc. (https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/section/1/)

Variations on a Theme: Common Types of Literary Analysis Papers

Specific kinds assignments will definitely vary depending on the class you are in and who the professor is (the same topic can be approached very differently by different scholars). Below are some brief strategies and tips for writing some of general types of papers you may encounter in literary studies (but this is by no means an exhaustive list): Comparative, Historical/Contextual, Theoretical, Applied.

Comparative/Synergistic

- A **comparative essay** is one in which you are called on to draw out similarities (sometimes also contrasts) between two or more elements. Most often, this will be between texts that have been covered in class, but it could also be between authors, genres, literary periods, or even between specific passages or characters in the same text.

- The goal here is to *make connections* and *draw conclusions* based on your comparisons (i.e. you must have a thesis about whatever you are comparing that is based on looking at them together.

- It is not enough to just compare and simply describe the similarities (and/or differences)—your thesis is what really matters. That argument will be the product of your comparison and will answer the broader question of "why is it important that these texts (authors, periods) be read together/studied closely against one another?" What can we learn from these similarities or differences? How do they help us understand the text(s) more fully?

- Some strategies that might be helpful as your read/think about how to compare (and what the importance of these comparison are) include:

  - Venn Diagrams
  - Charts
  - Lists

- Your particular assignment might be open to you (i.e. you can choose to compare any element of the text and craft an argument around that comparison), or your professor might ask you to compare/contrast very specific elements (the argument around those elements is still up to you to craft).

- This example (See engs_150_prompt.pdf) can give you a good idea of what this kind of assignment might look like [thanks to Professor Elizabeth Fenton for letting us use her assignment as an example].

- Note that this assignment directly cautions against straight comparing or contrasting (i.e. simply figuring out the similarities/differences and stopping there). It asks for you to demonstrate dialogue of some sort between texts—i.e. using two texts to craft an argument that is only possible if we read them together (implying that there are things about each that are inherently similar or different and that this has important meaning, which you will argue with the thesis you craft). Your goal is to create a synergy between the texts, leading to an argument about how they work together construct America as an idea.

- Note also that it is an example of an open assignment (described above)—you get to choose what texts and what in those texts to focus on in terms of how the texts "construct" America.

Historical/Contextual

- An analysis that focuses on the **context** of the text, or that views the text within its larger **historical** or **sociocultural framework** will often call not only for close reading of the text, but it may also require some additional research that will be used to help craft and support your argument (this is part of the theoretical school of historicism).

- As with any other paper, your thesis is what really matters—the context is not the primary focus, but rather how the context affects your reading of the text and how the text is affected by its context.

- Remember that the key here is to use your research on the historical and social context of the text to come up with a thesis on how the text and its context are related. This is not a history paper. One way to think about this particular methodology is as the attempt to study literature through history, asking how a text's context can help us understand it more fully.

- This sample prompt (See engs_137_prompt.pdf) from a class on the early modern period and Renaissance literature can give you an idea of the kinds of questions that can be asked using this lens [thanks to Professor Stephen Schillinger for letting us use his assignment as an example].

Theoretical

- A paper geared towards explicitly learning and/or practicing **literary theory** could take many forms: applying a particular theoretical lens to a text, comparing and contrasting two different theories, an intense study of one particular theory, and so on.

- Many times this kind of paper is designed to give you practice at studying texts using different theoretical lenses and aims to help you understand what a particular school of literary criticism believes the functions and limits of literature are.

- When applying theories to literature, remember, as always, that it is *your thesis that matters*. Theory is a framework…it is what you do with it that is the core of any literary analysis. Many pieces of literary criticism do not even mention what approach is used. *The approach is inherent in the argument the author makes*. This is a good benchmark to help you assess the appropriateness of your argument given the theory you are tasked to explore.

- This sample assignment (See engs_86_prompt.pdf) is from a final English 086 (intro to literary theory and criticism) class and is designed to get you to engage in-depth with a particular theory of literature [thanks to Professor Stephen Schillinger for letting us use his assignment as an example].

- Theory can be tough and confusing at first. And many theories of literature (though not all) are, rather than exclusive and independent, interrelated with one another and can be used in conjunction (e.g. a historicist-feminist reading). Ask lots of questions and stick with it!

Applied

Sometimes professors will ask you to use a text in a somewhat less formal kind of analysis (though no less critical). This could be called a kind of **applied essay** and might ask you to use a text to explore certain kinds of issues and your own, personal relation to them.

An example of this kind of essay might ask you to explore issues of race or gender, identity, and your own experiences by using the text(s) read in class. Maybe it asks you to analyze a current event that echoes some of the important concepts brought up by a particular text that you have read in class, or envision that you are an editor who is working with two very difficult texts and must decide how/if they should be edited (and the implications).

Depending on the assignment, the applied essay could also be any of the kinds of essays described above.

The most important thing to remember about this kind of writing is that while it is a somewhat less "formal" kind of literary analysis and might rely heavily on your own personal anecdotes, voice, and experience, it is no less critical. The goal of the assignment is still to engage with and analyze the text as well as demonstrate an understanding of the text in light of the themes of the class.

Be sure not to just dismiss this kind of assignment as "fluff"! They are just as important and rewarding to write as other kinds of analyses and, for many writers, can help you engage with the text(s) and class in an even deeper way by allowing you to connect them to personal experiences and events (and thereby forcing you to think critically about them).

MLA Style

Below are some adapted style guides created by our writing center administration that can help you answer questions about MLA formatting and citation style.

MLA Paper Formatting and In-text Citation

This sheet summarizes Modern Language Association (MLA) style for paper formatting and in-text citation, as published in the seventh edition of *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers.* MLA is only one of a number of popular styles for formatting, which are generally used according to discipline, but you should always use the methods and variations preferred by your professor.

For more complete style information, refer to seventh edition of the *MLA Handbook* or visit the OWL at Purdue at http://owl.english.purdue.edu/ and refer to the *MLA 2009 Formatting and Style Guide*.

Paper Formatting

An MLA-formatted paper should be:

- Typed and printed on 8.5"x11" white paper.
- Double-spaced between lines (including the first page heading), with a single space between sentences
- In a standard 12 pt. font (e.g. Times New Roman, Helvetica, Arial)
- Set to 1" margins
- Indented ½" at the beginning of each paragraph
- Labeled with a header that includes the page number
- Include in-text parenthetical citation with a Works Cited page at the end of your paper.

Starting your paper:

- On the first page, type your full name, instructor's name, course, and the date in the upper left corner (you should **NOT** create a separate title page) unless your professor specifies otherwise.
- Double-space after your heading and type your title (centered) using Title Case (do not add any underlining, quotes, or italics except to denote the title of another work, as you would in your text).
- Your paper should have a header on every page that includes your last name, followed by a space and the page number, set even with the right margin, ½" from the top of the paper.
- Double space again before beginning your first paragraph.

In-text Citation

MLA requires the use of parenthetical citation to indicate the use of ideas or direct quotes from others.

Insert a parenthetical citation that includes the author's last name and the page number at the end of the relevant sentence (or clause), inside the end punctuation. However, if the author's name appears in the sentence (e.g. Daniels argues that…), you only need to cite the page number at the end of the sentence. If you use more than one source by the same author, include a shortened title as well. The idea is to include as much (and only as much) information as necessary to refer the reader to the appropriate entry in your Works Cited.

If the author is not known, use a short version of the title according to how the source is alphabetized in your Works Cited (i.e. do not include the words "a," "an," or "the" at the beginning of the title).

Author(s)

It may be true that "in the appreciation of medieval art the attitude of the observer is of primary importance. . ." (Robertson 136).

Author(s) and source when using multiple sources by same author
Shakespeare's *King Lear* has been called a "comedy of the grotesque" (Frye, *Anatomy* 237).

Source alphabetized by title in the Works Cited (e.g. the author is unknown)
. . .for "every moment we have lived through we have also died out of into another order" (*Double Vision* 85).

MLA Works Cited

This sheet summarizes Modern Language Association (MLA) style for Works Cited citations, as published in the seventh edition of *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers.* MLA is only one of a number of popular styles for formatting, which are generally used according to discipline, but you should always use the methods and variations preferred by your professor.

For more complete style information, refer to seventh edition of the *MLA Handbook* or visit the OWL at Purdue at http://owl.english.purdue.edu/ and refer to the *MLA 2009 Formatting and Style Guide*.

Works Cited Formatting

In-text citations in MLA documents refer to full source citations in Works Cited, an alphabetical list of sources that appears on a separate page at the end of a paper.

- All sources should be alphabetized by author last name. If the author is not known, alphabetize by title (not including the words "a," "an," or "the"—e.g. alphabetize *The Journal of Immunology* under "J").
- Center title one inch from top, followed by a double-space, and then begin your entries.
- Entries should also be double-spaced, with all lines after the first indented by five spaces (1/2").
- Within the Works Cited, each source entry should be formatted according to the type and medium of the source. The 2008 MLA update requires that each entry include the medium (print, web, etc.). **In the interest of space, the examples below are not double-spaced.**

Print Sources

Book with one author
Franke, Damon. *Modernist Heresies: British Literary History, 1883-1924.* Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2008. Print.

Book with more than one author
Booth, Wayne C., Gregory G. Colomb, and Joseph M. Williams. The Craft of Research. 2nd ed. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2003. Print.

Corporate Author
National Research Council. Beyond Six Billion: Forecasting the World's Population. Washington: Natl. Acad., 2000. Print.

Two or more works by same author: For entries after the first one, replace the name with three hyphens

Borroff, Marie. Language and the Poet: Verbal Artistry in Frost, Stevens, and Moore. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1979. Print.
---. "Sound Symbolism as Drama in the Poetry of Robert Frost." PMLA 107.1 (1992): 131-44. JSTOR. Web. 13 May 2008.

Anthology
Spafford, Peter, comp. and ed. Interference: The Story of Czechoslovakia in the Words of its Writers. Cheltenham: New Clarion, 1992. Print.

Work in an anthology
Allende, Isabel. "Toad's Mouth." Trans. Margaret Sayers Peden. A Hammock beneath the Mangoes: Stories from Latin America. Ed. Thomas Colchie. New York: Plume, 1992. 83-88. Print.

Book with more than one edition
Baker, Nancy L., and Nancy Huling. A Research Guide for Undergraduate Students: English and American Literature. 6th ed. New York: MLA, 2006. Print.

Translation
Homer. *The Odyssey.* Trans. Robert Fagles. New York: Viking, 1996. Print.

If the translator is the more pertinent part of the citation (i.e. you are citing the translator's comments or process), put the translators name first:
Seidensticker, Edward G., trans. *The Tale of Genji.* By Murasaki Shikibu. New Yrok: Knopf, 1976. Print.

Reference Article
"Japan." *The Encyclopedia Americana*. 2004 ed. Print.

Journal Article
Piper, Andrew. "Rethinking the Print Object: Goethe and the Book of Everything." PMLA 121.1 (2006): 124-38. Print.

Magazine Article
If the magazine is printed monthly or less frequently, include the month and year. If it is published more frequently, include the entire date.

McEvoy, Dermot. "Little Books, Big Success." *Publishers Weekly* 30 Oct. 2006: 26-28. Print.

Newspaper Article
Jeromack, Paul. "This Once, a David of the Art World Does Goliath a Favor." New York Times 13 July 2002, late ed.: B7+. Print.

Editorial
Gergen, David. "A Question of Values." Editorial. *US News and World Report* 11 Feb. 2002: 72. Print.

Online Resources

For online resource citations, the latest version of MLA no longer requires a URL, but "web" must be added to citations, followed by the access date. However, if the URL is necessary to locate the source, **do** include it.

Citations for resources accessed on the web should include the following items as completely as possible, in order.

- Author, compiler, director, editor, narrator, performer, and/or translator
- Title (if you are citing part of a larger work or site, put the subsection in quotations and the larger work in italics, as with the citations types above). If there is no title, put the genre of page (e.g. home page).
- Version or edition
- Publisher or sponser, or N.p. if not applicable
- Publication date (day, month, year), or n.d. if no date

- Medium ("Web")
- Date of access (day, month, year)

Web-only Resources

Quade, Alex. "Elite Team Rescues Troops Behind Enemy Lines." *CNN.com*. Cable News Network, 19 Mar. 2007. Web. 15 May 2008.

Liu, Alan, ed. Home page. Voice of the Shuttle. Dept. of English, U of California, Santa Barbara, n.d. Web. 15 May 2008.

"Verb Tenses." Chart. *The OWL at Purdue.* Purdue U Online Writing Lab, 2001. Web. 15 May 2008.

Armstrong, Grace. Rev. of Fortune's Faces. The Roman de la Rose and the Poetics of Contingency, by Daniel Heller-Roazen. Bryn Mawr Review of Comparative Literature 6.1 (2007): n. pag. Web. 5 June 2008.

Print Sources Reproduced on the Web

If a source accessed on the web was originally published in print form (e.g. journal articles or texts scanned into a database), include the publishing information as in print entries, but also include "web" and the access date.

Bown, Jennifer M. "Going Solo: The Experience of Learning Russian in a Non-traditional Environment." Diss. Ohio State U, 2004. OhioLINKI. Web. 15 May 2008.

Child, L. Maria, ed. *The Freedmen's Book.* Boston, 1866. *Google Book Search.* Web. 15 May 2008.

Ovid. Metamorphoses. Trans. Arthur Golding. London, 1567. The Perseus Digital Library. Ed. Gregory Crane. Tufts U. Web. 12 Mar. 2007.

Citation examples taken from: Modern Language Association of America. *MLA Handbook for Writer of Research Papers.* New York: Modern Language Association of America, 2009. Print.

Professor Tips: Writing About Literature

Here are some tips straight from the professors!

What is one thing that students must never forget about writing papers about literature for English classes?

- A lot of students aren't aware that there is an argument guiding their work. The most important thing is, "Do I have an argument?" What constitutes a literary argument? How do I generate an argument? A lot depends on the assignment. Be clear about what the assignment is. A typical course assignment will involve some analysis of a literary text— maybe not the meaning of a literary text, but the meaningfulness of a literary text. *–Professor Barnaby*

- For a literature paper, you have to have an argument. It's not enough to describe or summarize a text. We are looking for a thesis statement that someone might take issue with, a claim that is supported by evidence, is clearly articulated. And not just an observation, but some account of why it's important. *–Professor Fenton*

What makes you go "Wow" when reading papers? —in a good way?

- A really clear argument, where the student is making a discernible claim about the text, and then tells me why it's so important. The other thing that really impresses me is when students integrate their evidence into their own prose seamlessly. When a student does a kind of brilliant, close analysis of the text and really explains to me why the evidence they are using is the best evidence for their claim and what the link is between the quote they are showing me and the argument they are making: That gets me happy! *–Professor Fenton*

- What impresses me is 3 things, taken from Quintilian, the famous Roman rhetorician of expository writing, or argumentative writing: First, from the Latin is inventio, or discovery, the argument that is really interesting. Second, dispositio, the ordering of things or construction of the argument. It's the hardest part of writing. What is going to count as evidence for the argument? What do you look at? How do you break it down? Third, elocutio, the writing mechanics or nice writing. Not too many passive verbs, an interesting blending of complex and simple sentences, paragraphs woven together in interesting ways with clear transitions between ideas and paragraphs. *–Professor Barnaby*

In a bad way?

- Students usually have the hardest time organizing their argument in a paper. It's the hardest part of writing, generally. In some ways it's the least fun. It's hard work. They

have a great idea, but are not sure how to get from point a, to point b, to point z. –*Professor Barnaby*

- Plagiarism. Nothing makes me madder than plagiarism. And it's not as hard to detect as students might imagine. –*Professor Fenton*

- Long block quotes without an explanation. Your analysis should always be longer than the text you're citing; otherwise your reader could just read the primary material. –*Professor Fenton*

- One of the biggest mistakes students make is to write a warm-up paragraph to get started, and then leave it as the introduction. Writing two pages of irrelevant information about the author or historical context . . . creates distance between the reader, the argument, and the text the student is writing about. –*Professor Fenton*

What can turn a good paper into a great paper?

- Revision! It's very hard, in any context, to write a really great paper in one draft. Even if it's just talking through the paper with the faculty member, you'll almost always do better. Revision is not just correcting writing mistakes. Revision literally means to see again; to think about it in a different context. You really learn how to write by revising. There is no formula for writing a great paper. –*Professor Barnaby*

- In the revision process,

  a) Work on the thesis statement. A good paper will highlight an important part of the text or context; that is a good observation. The hard thing is to figure out what that important thing is; a great observation will tell us why it's important.

  b) [Pay] very close attention to the evidence. A great paper will show you examples in the text that are thoroughly analyzed.

  c) A strong conclusion is important. A lot of students tend to write summary paragraphs for the conclusion. For shorter undergraduate papers (8-15 pages), your reader does not need to be reminded where you have been. So either a strong conclusion that draws the argument to a logical close and finishes on a high note, or after all your hard intellectual work is done, to push the paper in a new direction that's more speculative .

  –*Professor Fenton*

What is your favorite database for online research?

- Hands down, the MLA International Bibliography. Many students like to use JSTOR and Project MUSE. But students don't realize that the MLA database links to JSTOR and MUSE. In addition, MLA often includes book chapters as well as the oldest information to the newest available. It's the broadest and deepest database for literary studies. I also think that sometimes checking out a physical book is the best thing you can do. –*Professor Fenton*

Any last advice for writing papers about literature, whether for the intro courses or upper levels?

- Students do not go to office hours nearly enough. Office hours are part of the course. If you're confused about what the assignment is at all, don't talk to other students, go to the teacher.

  –*Professor Barnaby*

- Make sure that you understand the assignment and be clear on what the expectations are. Talk to the professor if you are not sure—professors often leave room for a range of writing styles and approaches to be acceptable and that can leave students unmoored. –*Professor Fenton*

- The best advice is to start early. It takes time and thinking to craft a thesis statement and write an argument. Start with the evidence you want to use. It doesn't work to come up with a thesis statement and then try and make the evidence fit the argument. Analyze the text first and see what it's telling you. Evidence produces a thesis. –*Professor Fenton*

- Concluding paragraphs are not nearly as important as introductory paragraphs. Most students sum up what they have done in their essay at the end, because they realize what their argument has been, but they should switch this to their intro to tell us what argument they are going to make. –*Professor Barnaby*

- Proofreading is also a good idea. You have spellcheck, but grammar check does not work.

  –*Professor Barnaby*