Writing About Literature

Writing About Literature

Brought to you by the Purdue University Online Writing Lab at
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Also see the OWL handout on Writing about Fiction at
http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/general/gl_fiction.html.

What makes for a good literature paper?

- An argument

When you write an extended literary essay, often one requiring research, you are essentially making an argument. You are arguing that your perspective–an interpretation, an evaluative judgment, or a critical evaluation–is a valid one.

- A debatable thesis statement

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

Examples

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

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

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

debatable.

A better thesis would be this:

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

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

You also want to avoid a thesis statement like this:

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

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

A better thesis would be this:

Lear, Romans, and Zen each view the soul as the center of human personality. Then you prove it, using examples from the texts that show that the soul is the center of personality.

What kinds of topics are good ones?

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

- A discussion of a work's characters: are they realistic, symbolic, historically-based?
- A comparison/contrast of the choices different authors or characters make in a work
- A reading of a work based on an outside philosophical perspective (Ex. how would a Freudian read Hamlet?)
- A study of the sources or historical events that occasioned a particular work (Ex. comparing G.B. Shaw's Pygmalion with the original Greek myth of Pygmalion)

- An analysis of a specific image occurring in several works (Ex. the use of moon imagery in certain plays, poems, novels)
- A "deconstruction" of a particular work (Ex. unfolding an underlying racist worldview in Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness)
- A reading from a political perspective (Ex. how would a Marxist read William Blake's "London"?)
- A study of the social, political, or economic context in which a work was written–how does the context influence the work?

How do I start research?

- The Internet

  Once you have decided on an interesting topic and work (or works), the best place to start is probably the Internet. Here you can usually find basic biographical data on authors, brief summaries of works, possibly some rudimentary analyses, and even bibliographies of sources related to your topic.

- The library

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

How do I use the information I find?

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

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

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

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

"Huck's altruism and feelings of compassion for Jim force him to surrender to

the danger" (Thomas 129).

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

What about the MLA format?

All research papers on literature use the MLA format, as it is the universal citation method for the field of literary studies. Whenever you use a primary or secondary source, whether you are quoting or paraphrasing, you will make parenthetical citations in the MLA format [Ex. (Smith 67).] Your Works Cited list will be the last page of your essay. Consult the OWL handout on MLA for further instructions at http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/research/r_mla.html.

Note, however, the following minor things about the MLA format:

- Titles of books, plays, or works published singularly (not anthologized) should be underlined. (Ex. Hamlet, Great Expectations)
- Titles of poems, short stories, or works published in an anthology will have quotation marks around them. (Ex. "Ode on a Nightingale," "The Cask of Amontillado")
- All pages in your essay should have your last name the page number in the top right hand corner. (Ex. Jones 12)

Tip

If you're using Microsoft Word, you can easily include your name and page number on each page by following the these steps:

1. Open "View" (on the top menu).
2. Open "Header and Footer." (A box will appear at the top of the page you're on. And a "Header and Footer" menu box will also appear).
3. Click on the "allign right" button at the top of the screen. (If you're not sure which button it is, hold the mouse over the buttons and a small window should pop up telling you which button you're on.)
4. Type in your last name and a space.
5. Click on the "#" button which is located on the "Header and Footer" menu box. It will insert the appropriate page number.
6. Click "Close" on the "Header and Footer" window.

That's all you need to do. Word will automatically insert your name and the page number on every page of your document.

What else should I remember?

- Don’t leave a quote or paraphrase by itself–you must introduce it, explain it, and show how it relates to your thesis.
- Block format all quotations of more than four lines.
- When you quote brief passages of poetry, line and stanza divisions are shown as a slash (Ex. "Roses are red, / Violets are blue / You love me / And I like you").
- For more help, see the OWL handout on using quotes at http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/grammar/g_quote.html.

Developed by Mark Dollar, Purdue Writing Lab 1999

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Writing about Fiction

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

Close Reading a Text

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

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

   Pitfalls:
   Highlighting too much
   Highlighting without notes in the margins

2. Write marginal notes in the text.

These should be questions, comments, dialogue with the text itself.
A paragraph from Doris Lessing's short story "A Woman on a Roof" serves as an example:

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

Marginal Notes	Text
Why is the man annoyed by the	Then they saw her, between chimneys, about fifty yards away. She lay face down on a brown

sunbather? Is Lessing commenting on sexist attitudes?	blanket. They could see the top part of her: black hair, aflushed solid back, arms spread out. "She's stark naked," said Stanley, sounding annoyed.

3. Keep a notebook for freewrite summaries and response entries.

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

4. Step back.

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

Developing a Thesis

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

   For example:
   If you are reading Conrad's The Secret Agent, do you seem to be most interested in what the author has to say about society? Choose a pattern of ideas and express it in the form of a question and an answer such as the following:
   Question: What does Conrad seem to be suggesting about early 20th century London society in his novel The Secret Agent?
   Answer: Conrad suggests that all classes of society are corrupt.

   Pitfalls:
   Choosing too many ideas.
   Choosing an idea without any support.

2. Once you have some general points to focus on, write your possible ideas and answer them.

   For example:

Question: How does Conrad develop the idea that all classes of society are corrupt?
Answer: He uses images of beasts and cannibalism whether he's describing socialites, policemen or secret agents.

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

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

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

For example:
Here's a student's thesis about Joseph Conrad's The Secret Agent.

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

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

Pre-Writing Activities

1. Freewrite

Without referring to the text or your notes, write for five to ten minutes on all the images (or the device you have chosen to examine) you can recall. This will provide an initial list which will make up your body of evidence.

2. Review

Look back through the text and your notes to further identify evidence, keeping focused on the particular device you want to discuss.

3. Research

Optional: Ask your instructor about outside sources before you use them.

Once you've identified enough textual evidence to support your thesis, you may want to see what other writers have had to say about your topic. This kind of appeal to other authorities helps you back up and interpret your reading of the work.

4. Evaluate

You will probably generate more evidence than you can use. One way to decide which evidence to take and which to leave is to limit your choices to the best, most illustrative examples you can find. Focus on how the devices are used to develop major characters, major scenes, and major turning points in the work.

Drafting Your Essay

You've read and annotated the work, developed a thesis, and identified your evidence. Now you're ready to work your evidence into your draft. Here are some effective techniques.

1. **Quoting**

- What is a quote?
  Quoting involves taking a word, phrase, or passage directly from the story, novel, or critical essay and working it grammatically into your discussion. Here's an example:

In his novel, The Secret Agent, Conrad describes Verloc as "undemonstrative and burly in a fat-pig style.... "(69) The pig image suggests that Verloc is not a lean, zealous anarchist, but is actually a corrupt, complacent middle class man who is interested in preserving his comfortable status.

Notice three things about the example above:

- The passage from the novel is enclosed in quotes and the page number is indicated in parentheses. For more help see our handouts on MLA and APA at http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/research/index.html.
- The passage is introduced in a coherent grammatical style; it reads like a

complete, correct sentence. For more help, see our handout on using quotation marks at http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/grammar/g_quote.html.
  - The quote is interpreted, not patched on and left for the reader to figure out what it means.

- When should I quote?
  - To make a particularly important point
  - When a passage or point is particularly well written
  - To include a particularly authoritative source
- How should I quote?
  - All quotes must be introduced, discussed, and woven into the text. As you revise, make sure you don't have two quotes end-to-end.
  - A good rule of thumb: Don't let your quotes exceed 25% of your text.

2. **Paraphrasing**

- What is paraphrasing?
  This is using your own words to say what the author said. To paraphrase the quote used above, you might say something like:

  Conrad describes Verloc as a big man who isn't very expressive and who looks like a pig.

- When should I paraphrase?
  - Paraphrasing is useful in general discussion (introduction or conclusion) or when the author's original style is hard to understand.
  - Again, you would need to interpret the paraphrase just as you would a quote.
  - For more help, see the OWL handout on paraphrasing at http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/research/r_paraphr.html.

3. **Summarizing**

- What is summarizing?
  This is taking larger passages from the original work and summing them up in a sentence or two. To use the example above: Conrad uses pig imagery to describe Verloc's character.

- When should I summarize?
  - Like paraphrasing, summary is useful in general discussion which leads up to a specific point and when you want to introduce the work and present the thesis.

- For more help, see the OWL handout on Summarizing at http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/research/r_quotprsum.html.

Avoiding Pitfalls

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

1. Plot Summary Syndrome

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

2. Right Answer Roulette

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

3. The "Everything is Subjective" Shuffle

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

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

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

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Literary Analysis: Getting Started

When writing an essay about literature, it is not acceptable to merely summarize a text. Instead, you should use your insights, backed by quotations, to illustrate a certain point (or answer a specific question) about the text. The following is a list of questions to help you get started in finding a topic you would like to pursue.

- What is the author trying to say?
- What is the theme of the work? How does the author relay the theme?
- Does the author use any special techniques? (e.g., foreshadowing, flashback, story-within-a-story, analogy, irony, satire) How do these techniques contribute to the text's general meaning or theme?
- What is the author's tone? (Sarcastic, tongue-in-cheek, amused, etc.) Why would the author employ this tone?
- Who is the narrator? Does the narrator's point of view differ from the author's? How can you tell? What is the narrator's perspective? Why is the narration from this perspective?
- What is the setting of the text? How does setting contribute to the text's overall meaning?
- What symbols does the author employ? How do the symbols contribute to the work as a whole?
- Does the work have a motif? What is the significance of a given motif? How does the motif add to the text as a whole?
- Which character interests you the most? Why?
- Do characters change over time? How?
- How does a specific character function within the work? What is her/his purpose?
- What does the work remind you of? (Other poems, books, articles)
- Can you compare/contrast two characters in the text?
- Can you compare/contrast this work to another text you are familiar with?
- Have you ever seen a play or movie version of this work? How did it differ?
- Can you critique the work from a different perspective? (Feminist, conservative, Marxist, theological, historical, etc.)
- How does the author portray a particular social group? Why?
- What interests you the most about the work?
- Did you enjoy the text? Why or why not?
- If you were to meet the author, what questions would you ask?
- Were you confused by any parts of the text? Why?
- What were the text's strongest points? What were the text's weakest points?