

Notes on Writing about Literature: A Brief Guide to Better Writing
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Writing the Essay

Writing an essay about literature may seem at first a daunting and mystifying process. However, writing about literature is no more difficult than writing for any other subject. In any paper about literature, you are trying to persuade your reader that your reading of the text (that is, your interpretation or your analysis) is worth considering because it adds a valuable dimension to understanding the text, a dimension that may not be immediately apparent to your reader. In other words, in an essay about any literary text, you are trying to persuade your reader to look at the text in a way in which perhaps he has not looked at before. Your slant on the reading, your position, and your insights would therefore lead your reader to a richer understanding and appreciation of the text. Your reader may not agree with your interpretation of the text but then your job, as a writer, is not to prove that your interpretation is the only valid one. Your job as a writer about literature is to offer a well thought out position on the text, a reading that is responsibly developed and sustained throughout your paper.

Remember that not all interpretations of the text are equally good or equally acceptable. Partial familiarity with the text will never lead to any responsible interpretations. Twisting or mangling the text to fit some preconceived or half-baked notions about it will also never lead to responsible interpretations. Imposing your own religious or moral predilections on an author's meaning will also never lead to worthwhile interpretations. However, knowing the text thoroughly, understanding it, and thinking long and deeply about it are more likely to lead to a responsible interpretation. To know whether an interpretation is valid, you need to test all your assumptions against the text. If the text bears out your assumptions and interpretation, then you are on the right track. If the text sustains your interpretation only partially, or you seem to be making claims that are not backed up by the text, you need to do more reading and thinking about your text before attempting the paper.

Ultimately, writing an essay about literature is the result of discovering that you have insights about a text, insights that you feel deeply about and that you wish to communicate to your reader clearly and in an organized and logical fashion.

The Introduction

The introduction to your paper should arouse your reader's interest; it should place the literary work within the context of the specific issues that your paper will raise and it should define those issues. Under no circumstances should you begin your introduction with abstract generalities that lie outside the scope of your paper. Many times inexperienced writers are afraid to tackle their topic or question directly and write global introductions full of abstract generalities.

For example, if you are asked to discuss the idea of marriage in Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice, **do not begin** your paper with global statements about marriage in general and what a sacred and time-cherished institution it has been since time immemorial. Such an introduction has nothing to do with the novel specifically and only wastes your reader's time.

Examine the four introductions below. You will see that all of these introductions begin simply by placing the stories in the context of the writer's discussion, by defining the issues that the paper will raise, and by narrowing to a thesis statement.

1)

In Flannery O'Connor's "Good Country People" and Alice Munro's "Wild Swans," we meet two women who are completely unprepared to experience their first sexual encounter. The perspectives that Hulga and Rose adopt are shaped by the teachings of their mothers (or, in Rose's case, stepmother), Mrs. Hopewell and Flo respectively. Although Mrs. Hopewell and Flo share a patronizing manner and a tendency to stereotype, Hulga's and Rose's feelings for their mothers are quite different. Despite this difference, they are equally influenced by their mothers' philosophies, each sharing a desire to break away from their routine lives. Unfortunately, Hulga and Rose do not realize that what gives birth to this craving is also what makes them ill-equipped to handle the situations that set them on their individual courses of transformation.

2)

The characterization of our protagonist Connie is vital to an understanding of her ripeness for seduction in Joyce Carol Oates' short story "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" Connie's youth and vanity, coupled with her antagonistic relationship with the members of her family, effectively set the stage for her seduction by the older Arnold Friend.

3)

In Flannery O'Connor's "Good Country People," the cynical, rude, and world-weary Hulga believes herself to be on such a high philosophical and intellectual plane that she is without illusion. Her main belief is to believe in nothing. Considering the frustration and dullness of her life with her mother and Mrs. Freeman, it is no wonder that Hulga assumes a jaded outlook. Unfortunately, this weariness does not come from extensive life experience and she is not prepared to deal with Manley Pointer, an example of the "good country people" that her mother is so fond of. Hulga does not practice what she preaches, and she trusts who he says he is without question. By doing so, Hulga loses her artificiality and gains cause for true cynicism.

4)

"Good Country People" is a story about prejudice, manipulation, and victimization. Mrs. Hopewell's personal prejudices along with Hulga's internalization of these prejudices, their problematic mother-daughter relationship, and Hulga's low self-image provide fertile ground for Hulga's victimization. Hulga and her mother both maintain a superior attitude toward each other as well as the people with whom they interact in this story. It is this attitude that ultimately leads to Manley Pointer's ability to take advantage of Hulga.

Please note that none of these introductions wastes any of the reader's time with abstract generalities. Also none of these introductions makes it painfully apparent to the reader that the writer is answering a specific assignment. All of them do, however, inform the reader of the paper's argument.

The Thesis Statement

An essay about a piece of literature is NOT a plot summary of it. Rather, it is an argument about it. If you find yourself reverting to plot summary instead of analyzing the text and arguing your point about it, stop and think again about what you are trying to prove. In order to interpret rather than describe, analyze rather than summarize, all essays about literature must contain **a thesis statement**. Think about it this way: if you had only one idea that you wished to communicate most to your reader, what would it be? The thesis statement is the most important idea in your essay. It contains your position, your opinion, the conclusion that you have formulated as a result of close reading, and the hook on which you hang your entire argument. It is always a good idea to make your thesis the last sentence of

your introduction so that nothing else distracts your reader from the statement of your position, the central idea and its development in the body of your paper.

Again, the thesis is a claim, an opinion that needs to be proved valid by your discussion. It needs to be both restrictive and precise and formulated to fit the scope and length of your assignment. Here are a few guidelines that may help you to avoid some thesis statement pitfalls*:

- ◆ **A thesis statement is NOT an announcement of your subject or a description of your intentions.** At all costs avoid statements such as, “In this essay I will argue that . . .” or “In this essay I will prove that . . .” because such statements are awkward and make you sound naïve and a novice.
- ◆ **A thesis statement is NOT cluttered with expressions such as “In my opinion,” “I believe,” and the like.** Such phrases make you sound defensive and uncertain and waste your reader’s time. Usually, the important part comes after such expressions, so leave them out.
- ◆ **Avoid oversimplified claims** because such will never persuade your reader that you have a thorough understanding of the text or that you have any worthwhile interpretation to offer. For example, “In William Faulkner’s ‘A Rose for Emily,’ Miss Grierson is crazy” is certainly an oversimplified claim because it overlooks and undermines the complexity of the character. Making oversimplified claims will not give you much credibility as an insightful reader of the text.
- ◆ **A thesis statement is NEVER a statement of fact.** Thesis statements are assertions of opinions that take the form of generalizations whose validity needs to be argued vigorously with discussion and examples from the text. Facts cannot be argued. To say that “Nathaniel Hawthorne penned ‘Young Goodman Brown’” is to present a fact that cannot be argued.
- ◆ **A thesis statement DOES NOT present an idea that is self-evident or dead-ended.** For example, saying that “Shakespeare’s ‘When my love claims she is made of truth’ is a sonnet,” or that “*Hamlet* ends tragically for the hero,” would get you nowhere. These are not analytical statements that lead to discussion or argument. For another example, “At the end of John Updike’s ‘A & P’ Sammy quits his job” is a statement that does not promise a discussion. However, saying that “Sammy quits his job at the A & P **because** he comes to a

realization that people are more important than policies” would bring you closer to a workable thesis.

- ◆ **Limit your claim to a statement that you can prove within the assigned length of your paper.** For example, the claim that “Both Hamlet and Othello are heroes” is too broad and unfocused and not a thesis statement at all. Saying that “Both Hamlet and Othello are heroes because . . .” would bring the idea closer to being a thesis but the claim would still be too broad to receive adequate development in a short paper.
- ◆ **A thesis is NEVER stated in form of a question.** The thesis is an opinion that the paper will demonstrate as valid or feasible in light of your development with persuasive examples from the text.
- ◆ **Above all, remember that the thesis statement is a complete thought** that has a subject, a verb, and a controlling idea expressed in key or operative words that indicate to your reader the direction in which you will take your discussion.

The following examples of weak and strong theses should help:

Weak: In Book I of The Iliad, Homer presents Achilles and Agamemnon as both similar and different.

Strong: In Book I of Homer’s Iliad we see how pride, stubbornness, and power—qualities that Achilles and Agamemnon share—seem to unite and divide the two as well. Ironically, the same qualities that unite them also make it impossible for them to coexist.

The first example is weak because everything under the sun is both similar and different and the thesis does not make a judgment or express any analytical thought. The second example is strong because it is restrictive and precise. The operative words (*pride, stubbornness, power*) indicate the lines along which the writer will set up the comparison and contrast and the thesis makes a definite claim or judgment.

***Note:** The thesis statement pitfalls have been adapted from Jean Wyrick’s Steps to Writing Well. They have been modified and adjusted to the demands of formulating a thesis when writing about literature.

Organizing the Essay

The organization of your paper will depend to a great extent on your thesis statement. If you have formulated a restrictive and precise thesis statement with focused key words or hooks upon which to hang your argument, organizing your paper will be fairly easy.

Make your paper follow a coherent, unified, logical, and progressive structure. In other words, lead up to the main point of your argument in a logical and progressive manner. Your body paragraphs should have clear topic sentences or transitional generalizations that develop one aspect of the thesis each. Develop each of your topic sentences fully with discussion and evidence from the text; make each of your main ideas lead logically into the next main idea.

To signal the progression of your ideas, use transitional words and phrases that clearly indicate the logical relationship between those ideas and that provide for smooth passage from one paragraph to the next, from one idea to the next.

Test the logical organization of your ideas this way: write out your thesis and each of your topic sentences and see whether they signal a logical and coherent progression of ideas. Your thesis statement and your topic sentences should by themselves provide a microcosmic view of the entire essay. If your topic sentences do not suggest a logical progression or sequence, then you need to reorganize the essay.

There are several ways in which you can control the progression of your ideas. For example, you may choose to organize your essay in a climactic order, that is, progressing from the less significant idea to the most significant idea. Or you may organize the essay by moving from the known to the unknown, from the simple to the complex, and so forth.

To write a coherent and unified essay means that no portion of your argument can be taken out of sequence or break away from a tightly knit overall structure and the development of the larger argument.

Remember that organizing an essay effectively does not come to anyone instantaneously. It needs careful thinking and testing of ideas against the promise of the thesis statement and careful planning.

Writing the Conclusion

Often students overlook the importance of writing an effective conclusion. They are content with a mechanical restatement of their thesis or a repetition of a part of their introduction. They write a two or three sentence conclusion and think that it is sufficient. However, a conclusion can make or break a paper. While it is true that the conclusion should return in some manner to the main thrust of the essay and its main idea, it is important to leave your reader with something to think about. Doing so **does not mean** that you introduce new ideas into your conclusion or that you recant your argument. It means that you place your argument into a larger perspective and try to show how the issues that you have discussed or analyzed would benefit from further analysis.

At all cost, you should avoid tacking on a mechanical and repetitive conclusion or making excuses for what you have or have not done in the paper.