

Guy de Maupassant (1850–1893)

*The Necklace* (1884)

Translated by Edgar V. Roberts

## Reading Literature and Responding to It Actively

Imaginative literature, although also grounded in facts, is less concerned with the factual record than with the revelation of truths about life and human nature. Recently another genre has been emphasized within the category of non-fiction prose. This is **creative nonfiction**, a type of literature that is technically nonfiction, such as essays, articles, diaries, and journals, but which nevertheless introduces carefully structured form, vivid examples, relevant quotations, and highly creative and imaginative insights.

Sometimes after reading a work it is difficult to express thoughts about it and to answer questions about it. But more active and thoughtful reading gives us the understanding to develop well-considered answers. Obviously, we need to follow the work and to understand its details, but just as importantly, we need to respond to the words, get at the ideas, and understand the implications of what is happening. We rely on our own fund of knowledge and experience to verify the accuracy and truth of situations and incidents, and we try to articulate our own emotional responses to the characters and their problems.

To illustrate active responding, we will examine “The Necklace” (1884), by the French writer Guy de Maupassant.<sup>1</sup> “The Necklace” is included here with marginal notes like those that any reader might make during original and follow-up readings. Many notes, particularly at the beginning, are *assimilative*; that is, they record details about the action. But as the story progresses, the marginal comments are more concerned with conclusions about the story’s meaning. Toward the end, the comments are full rather than minimal; they result not only from first responses but also from considered thought.

She was one of those pretty and charming women, born, as if by an error of destiny, into a family of clerks and copyists. She had no dowry, no prospects, no way of getting known, courted, loved, married by a rich and distinguished man. She finally settled for a marriage with a minor clerk in the Ministry of Education.

She was a simple person, without the money to dress well, but she was as unhappy as if she had gone through bankruptcy, for women have neither rank nor race. In place of high birth or important family connections, they can rely only on their beauty, their grace, and their charm. Their inborn finesse, their elegant taste, their engaging personalities, which are their only power, make working-class women the equals of the grandest ladies.

She suffered constantly, feeling herself destined for all delicacies and luxuries. She suffered because of her grim apartment with its drab walls, threadbare furniture, ugly curtains. All such things, which most other women in her situation would not even have noticed, tortured her and filled her with despair. The sight of the young country girl who did her simple housework awakened in her only a sense of desolation and lost hopes. She daydreamed of large, silent anterooms, decorated with oriental tapestries and lighted by high bronze floor lamps, with two elegant valets in short culottes dozing in large armchairs under the effects of forced-air heaters. She imagined large drawing rooms draped in the most expensive silks, with fine end tables on which were placed knickknacks of inestimable value. She dreamed of the perfume of dainty private rooms, which were designed only for intimate tête-à-têtes with the closest friends, who because of their achievements and fame would make her the envy of all other women.

When she sat down to dinner at her round little table covered with a cloth that had not been washed for three days, in front of her husband who opened the kettle while declaring ecstatically, “Ah, good old boiled beef! I don’t know anything better,” she

*“She” is pretty but poor, and has no chance in life unless she marries. Without connections, she has no entry into high society and marries an insignificant clerk.*

*She is unhappy.*

*A view of women who have no chance for an independent life and a career. In 1884, women had nothing more than this. Sad.*

*She suffers because of her cheap belongings, wanting expensive things. She dreams of wealth and of how other women would envy her if she could display finery. But such luxuries are unrealistic and unattainable for her.*

*Her husband’s taste is for plain things, while she dreams of expensive gourmet food. He has adjusted to his status. She has not.*

## Reading and Responding in a Notebook or Computer File

The marginal comments printed with "The Necklace" demonstrate the active reading-responding process you should apply to everything you read. Use the margins in your text similarly to record your comments and questions, but plan also to record your more lengthy responses in a notebook, on note cards, on separate sheets of paper, or in a computer file. Be careful not to lose anything; keep all your notes. As you progress from work to work, you will find that your written or saved comments will be immensely important to you as your record, or journal, of your first impressions, together with your more carefully considered and expanded thoughts.

In keeping your notebook, your objective should be to learn assigned works inside and out and then to say perceptive things about them. To achieve this goal, you need to read the work more than once. Develop a good note-taking system so that as you read, you will create a "memory bank" of your own knowledge. You can make withdrawals from this fund of ideas when you begin to write. As an aid in developing your own procedures for reading and "depositing" your ideas, you may wish to begin with the following *Guidelines for Reading*. Of course, you will want to modify these suggestions and add to them as you become a more experienced and disciplined reader.

### *Guidelines for Reading*

1. Observations for basic understanding
  - a. Explain words, situations, and concepts. Write down words that are new or not immediately clear. Use your dictionary, and record the relevant meanings in your notebook. Write down special difficulties so that you can ask your instructor about them.
  - b. Determine what is happening in the work. For a story or play, where do the actions take place? What do they show? Who is involved? Who is the major figure? Why is he or she major? What relationships do the characters have with one another? What concerns do the characters have? What do they do? Who says what to whom? How do the speeches advance the action and reveal the characters? For a poem, what is the situation? Who is talking, and to whom? What does the speaker say about the situation? Why does the poem end as it does and where it does?
2. Notes on first impressions
  - a. Make a record of your reactions and responses. What did you think was memorable, noteworthy, funny, or otherwise striking? Did you worry, get scared, laugh, smile, feel a thrill, learn a great deal, feel proud, find a lot to think about?
  - b. Describe interesting characterizations, events, techniques, and ideas. If you like a character or an idea, explain what you like, and do the same for characters and ideas you don't like. Is there anything else in the

work that you especially like or dislike? Are parts easy or difficult to understand? Why? Are there any surprises? What was your reaction to them? Be sure to use your own words when writing your explanations.

3. Development of ideas and enlargement of responses
  - a. Trace developing patterns. Make an outline or a scheme: What conflicts appear? Do these conflicts exist between people, groups, or ideas? How are the conflicts resolved? Is one force, idea, or side the winner? How do you respond to the winner or to the loser?
  - b. Write expanded notes about characters, situations, and actions. What explanations need to be made about the characters? What is the nature of the situations (e.g., young people discover a damaged boat, and themselves, in the spring; a prisoner tries to hide her baby from cruel guards, and so on)? What is the nature of the actions (e.g., a mother and daughter go shopping, a series of strangers intrude upon the celebration of a Christening, a woman is told that her husband has been killed in a train wreck, a group of children are taken to a fashionable toy store, and so on)? What are the people like, and what are their habits and customs? What sort of language do they use?
  - c. Memorize important, interesting, and well-written passages. Copy them in full on note cards, and keep these in your pocket or purse. When walking to class, riding public transportation, or otherwise not occupying your time, learn them by heart. Please take memorization seriously.
  - d. Always write down questions that come up during your reading. You may raise these in class, and trying to write out your own answers will also aid your own study.

## Writing Essays on Literary Topics

Finished writing is the sharpened, focused expression of thought and study. It begins with the search for something to say—an idea. Not all ideas are equal; some are better than others, and getting good ideas is an ability that you will develop the more you think and write. As you discover ideas and explain them in words, you will also improve your perceptions and increase your critical faculties.

In addition, because literature itself contains the subject material (though not in a systematic way) of philosophy, religion, psychology, sociology, and politics, learning to analyze literature and to write about it will also improve your capacity to deal with these and other disciplines.

### *Writing Does Not Come Easily—for Anyone*

A major purpose of your being in college, of which your composition and literature course is a vital part, is to develop your capacity to think and to express your thoughts clearly and fully. However, the process of creating a successfully argued essay—the actual process itself of writing—is not automatic. Writing begins in uncertainty and hesitation, and it becomes certain and confident—accomplished—only as a result of great care, applied thought, a certain amount of experimentation, the passage of time, and much effort. When you read complete, polished, well-formed pieces of writing, you might assume, as many of us do, that the writers wrote their successful versions the first time they tried and never needed to make any changes and improvements at all. In an ideal world, perhaps, something like this could happen, but not in this one.

If you could see the early drafts of writing you admire, you would be surprised and startled—and also encouraged—to see that good writers are also human and that what they first write is often uncertain, vague, tangential, tentative, incomplete, and messy. Good writers do not always like their first drafts; nevertheless, they work with their efforts and build upon them. They reconsider their ideas and try to restate them, discard some details, add others, chop paragraphs in half and reassemble the parts elsewhere, throw out much (and then maybe recover some of it), revise or completely rewrite sentences, change words, correct misspellings, sharpen expressions, and add new material to tie all the parts together in a smooth, natural flow.

## The Goal of Writing: To Show a Process of Thought

As you approach the task of writing, you should constantly realize that your goal should always be to *explain* the work you are analyzing. You should never be satisfied simply to restate the events in the work. Too often students fall easily into a pattern of retelling a story or play, or of summarizing the details of a poem. But nothing could be further from what is expected from good writing. You need to demonstrate your thought. Thinking is an active process that does not happen accidentally. Thinking requires that you develop ideas, draw conclusions, exemplify them and support them with details, and connect everything in a coherent manner. Your goal should constantly be to explain the results of your thinking—your ideas, your play of mind over the materials of a work, your insights, your conclusions. This is the ideal.

Approach each writing assignment with the following thoughts in mind: You should consider your reader as a person who has read the work, just as you have done. This person knows what is in the work, and therefore does not need you to restate what she or he already knows. Instead, your reader wants to learn from you what to think about it. Therefore, always, your task as a writer is to explain something about the work, to describe the thoughts that you can develop about it. Let us consider the story we have just read, Maupassant's "The Necklace." We have recognized that the main character, Mathilde Loisel, is a young Parisian housewife who is married to a minor clerk in the Ministry of Education. We know this, but if we are reading an essay about the story we will want to learn more. Let us then suppose that a first goal of one of your paragraphs is to explain the deep dissatisfaction Mathilde feels in the early part of the story. Your paragraph might go as follows:

In the early part of the story Maupassant establishes that Mathilde is deeply dissatisfied with her life. Her threadbare furniture and drab walls are a cause of her unhappiness. Under these circumstances her daydreams of beautiful rooms staffed by "elegant valets," together with a number of rooms for intimate conversations with friends, multiply her dissatisfaction. The meager meals that she shares with her husband make her imagine sumptuous banquets that she feels are rightfully hers by birth but that are denied her because of her circumstances. The emphasis in these early scenes of the story is always on Mathilde's discontentment and frustration.

Notice here that your paragraph ties the story's events to the **idea** of Mathilde's unhappiness. The events are there, but you are explaining to us, as readers, that the events are directly related to Mathilde's unhappiness. The paragraph illustrates a process of thought. Here is another way in which you might use a thought to connect the same materials:

In the early part of the story Maupassant emphasizes the **economic** difficulty of Mathilde's life. The threadbare furniture and ugly curtains, for example, highlight that there is no money to purchase better things. The same

sparseness of existence is shown by the meager meals that she shares with her husband. With the capacity to appreciate better things, Mathilde is forced by circumstances to make do with worse. Her dreams of sumptuous banquets are therefore natural, given her level of frustration with the life around her. In short, her unhappiness is an understandable consequence of her aversion to her plain and drab apartment and the tightness of money.

Here the details are substantially the same as in our first paragraph, but they are unified by a different idea, namely the economic constraints of Mathilde's life. What is important is that neither paragraph tells only the details. Instead the paragraphs illustrate the goal of writing with a purpose. Whenever you write, you should always be trying, as in these examples, to use a dominating thought or thoughts to shape the details in the work you are analyzing.

Reading literature and writing about it are two closely related processes, so much so that the skilled reader of literature should always read with a pencil in hand, and mark the text in order better to understand it. (If you are working with a library book, make a photocopy of the material so that you can mark it without destroying someone else's book!) In literature, language is often compressed, or squeezed tightly into a shape or *genre* (meaning kind or type). Reading with a pencil is a tool that helps you to separate gently the layers of meaning. The process of writing about literature helps you to examine these layers one at a time in a formal and disciplined way so that your reading can be shared with others. In this unit we will look at the steps a reader takes in order to become a writer.

## HIGHLIGHTING AND ANNOTATING THE TEXT

Let's take as an example the short story by Jamaica Kincaid, "Girl." The first step is to *read* the piece through at least twice. Next, read with a pencil. As you read, use the pencil to:

1. Circle key words (words that you do not understand, words that are repeated, for instance).
2. Underline lines or phrases that relate to the theme of the chapter, in this case children and families.
3. Annotate by asking questions in the margin about what the writer means or to record your own responses to the writer's words.
4. Highlight key phrases: "this is how" is repeated, so it might be important; the word "slut" seems powerful and stands out; related words like "sew" and "button," "buttonhole," and "hem" tell what the speaker is talking about.

*- simple domestic task*  
 (this is how to sew on a button; this is how to make a buttonhole for the button you have just sewed on; this is how to hem a dress when you see the hem coming down and so to prevent yourself from looking like the slut! know you are so bent on becoming...  
*repeated phrase*  
*rhythm of repetition*  
*unusual word!*  
*who is the "I"?*

You should read the entire story in this way, circling new words like "benna" and "dasheen." Next, use a dictionary or a glossary to find the meanings of words you do not know. The word "slut," for instance, appears in the *Oxford English Dictionary* with several meanings, including:

"A woman of a low or loose character; a bold or impudent girl; a hussy, a jade."

Where would you look for the definition of words like "benna" and "dasheen" if these were not in your standard American dictionary?

## TAKING NOTES

Once you have carefully read the work several times, and highlighted and annotated as much as you can, the next step is to begin taking notes to help organize your impressions of the work so you can develop a *thesis* for your essay.

Notes can include:

- Listing
- Asking Questions
- Brainstorming
- Developing Subject Trees
- Keeping a Journal

### Listing

Listing is the most familiar technique for organizing thoughts. We all make shopping lists or lists of friends to invite to a party or names for sending out Christmas cards. When writing about literature, the list might help put ideas into categories. If your subject were "Girl," you might begin with a "do" list and a "don't" list:

*Do:* wash clothes on certain days; cook fritters in oil; sew buttons on; walk like a lady; love a man.

*Don't:* speak to "wharf-rat" boys; walk like a slut; pick other people's flowers; be the kind of woman the baker won't let squeeze the bread.

Or you could list whatever has struck you as significant in your reading, and then review and evaluate what you have listed to see if any common theme has emerged.

Here is a typical list generated by one student on her notebook computer.

1. The imperative tone of the story shows a rigid system of parental authority in place, nothing like modern families in America today.
2. Many of the specific references in the story indicate the presence of a particular West Indian culture, for example, "pumpkin fritters," "don't sing benna," "wharf-rat boys," "dasheen," "doukona," etc.
3. The cultural milieu is one in which the types of directives the mother presents to the daughter are traditional female ones involving such activities as cooking, sewing, cleaning, housekeeping, and so on.
4. The mother also displays a traditional set of values by trying to instill in her daughter the proper comportment to assume around men.
5. Folklore and superstition are also replete in the lore which the mother is transmitting to the daughter, providing further evidence of a traditional culture; for example, she instructs her "how to throw back a fish you don't like," "don't throw stones at blackbirds," "how to spit up in the air if you feel like it."
6. Religion is another significant cultural value which the mother tries to instill in her daughter; for example, she says "on Sundays try to walk like a lady," "don't sing benna in Sunday school."
7. Above all, the mother displays the typical attitude of any mother who lives in a traditional culture and whose role it is to instill in her daughter the conventions and mores of her culture.

The function of listing is to generate ideas that ultimately can be used to help you organize the first draft of your essay.

### Asking Questions

What pattern do the lists reveal? What insight into the story's meaning do the "do" and "don't" lists offer? The next step is to ask more questions, including who, what, and why.

Who is speaking in the story "Girl"?

To whom is she/he speaking?

How do we know?

Why are the sentences so long?

What is the tone of the speaker's voice?

Why are there so many domestic details about food and behavior?

Are there any clues to the gender of the speaker and the listener?

Does the language limit the story to one time or place, or is it universal in its meaning?

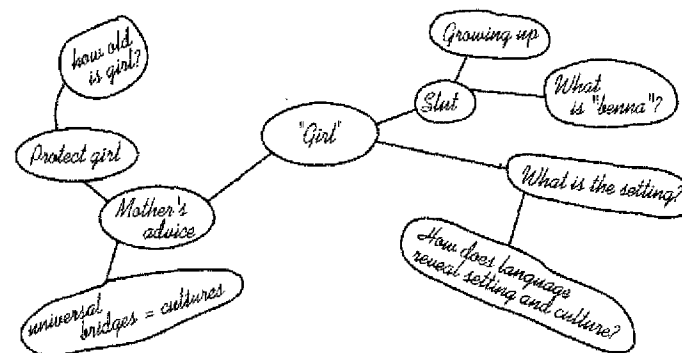
Does this work remind me of any others that I have read?

### Brainstorming

Brainstorming is another way to generate ideas for a paper. Brainstorming can be done by yourself, but it can also be done in a group with two or three students who have all read the same story or poem.

- Sit in a small group.
- Have one member of the group read the story or poem out loud.
- Then let everyone offer his or her own insights into the meaning of the poem.
- Assign one member to record all of the responses.

Your brainstorming might result in a page that looks like this:



Working with a group, you may find that the ideas of other classmates, whose backgrounds are different from your own, help you identify special features of the story you might have overlooked.

### Developing Subject Trees

Developing subject trees is another way to think about the story. From the "trunk" of the story "Girl," you might branch out into topics:

a mother's advice to her daughter

women's writing

do's and don'ts about sex

domestic details

unusual language: how does the writer convey cultural identity through details and local language?

etiquette books; *Dear Abby*; *Miss Manners*; giving advice: how is the mother's monologue like a "Dear Abby" letter?

### Keeping a Journal

Keeping a journal is another way to record your ideas about a work of literature. You can use pages in a looseleaf, or keep a separate notebook. Each time you read a new story, start a new page and jot down your impressions of the work. Let yourself use all of the techniques—listing, asking questions, brainstorming and subject trees—to record your impressions. You will find that when you want to write a paper, glancing back at journal entries makes finding a topic easier. A journal page might look like this:

A mother seems to be speaking to her daughter about all sorts of chores and different kinds of behavior. What to do and what not to do is the subject. The mother talks nonstop. It's as if she is giving the "girl" a lifetime of advice in one lecture. I can almost see the mother: maybe she's hanging clothes on a line in the hot sun and the daughter, she's about twelve, is following holding a basket of clothespins. The two work together and the mother talks as she hangs the sheets. I say the girl is about twelve because the mother uses the word "slut," so she's already worried about her daughter hanging out with boys and getting into trouble. What's funny is that even though it sounds like the mother is just rambling, when I read the story again, it was like there was a rhythm to it, and a whole lifetime of experience. I don't know what "benna" is, but whatever it is, the mother doesn't seem to like it much.

### SELECTING AND LIMITING THE TOPIC

Once you have read the work, discussed it with your teacher and classmates, highlighted, annotated, and taken lots of notes, you are ready to find a topic for your essay. One way to select a topic is to ask questions and then write out a tentative answer. You can use the questions you asked while taking notes, and expand these with key words from the brainstorming session and the journal entry.

Who is speaking, to whom, about what?

The mother gives her daughter womanly advice.

Possible topic: something about mother-daughter relationships.

Once you have some ideas, the next step is to narrow the topic, or limit it, so that it is manageable in an essay of about 500 to 750 words. Some inexperienced writers think that keeping the topic very broad, like "women writers," makes it easier to write because they won't run out of material. But more experienced writers know better.

Broad topic: Women writers

More limited: Women writers' use of details

Even more limited: use of domestic details by African-American women writers

After you have a sufficiently limited topic, you can begin to plan and write the essay, using the following steps:

- Developing a Thesis
- Considering Audience and Purpose
- Writing and Revising
- Responding to Comments

### DEVELOPING A THESIS

Developing a thesis or main idea means that you have to decide what you want to say about the limited topic. The *thesis* is the most important part of the essay, for the thesis controls the plan for what follows. The thesis gives the reader your point of view or opinion on the limited topic. It may also suggest which strategy you plan to use to organize the body of the essay.

If your limited topic is use of domestic detail by African-American women writers, you can create a thesis by asking, what do I want to say about this topic? What do I mean? What is my purpose in writing the essay?

You can begin, as you did earlier, by asking questions.

Why am I interested in this topic?

What is unique or special about it?

What did I think about when I read the story that led me to this topic?

Do I like the story? Why or why not?

What about the story relates to the theme of children and families, and how does the story reflect on the multicultural themes of the other readings?

Sample thesis statements:

1. In her story "Girl," Jamaica Kincaid uses an accumulation of domestic details to reveal a mother's strict but loving concern for her daughter.
2. The mother in Jamaica Kincaid's story "Girl" cannot speak directly of her love for her daughter, so she uses details about a woman's everyday life to convey her pride and anxiety about her daughter.

Statements can be refined and expanded as you develop your ideas. The next step is to consider your audience and purpose.

called brainstorming, requires you to examine any and every **subject** that your mind can produce.

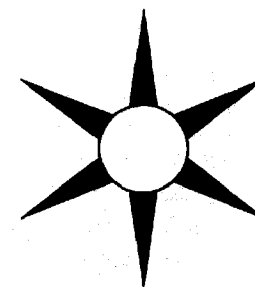
Just as you are trying to reach for ideas, however, you also should **try to** introduce purpose and resolution into your thought. You have to **zero in on** something specific, and develop your ideas through this process. **Although** what you first write may seem indefinite, the best way to help your **think-**ing is to put your mind, figuratively, into specific channels or grooves, and then to confine your thoughts **within** these boundaries. What matters is to get your mind going on a particular topic and to get your thoughts down on paper or onto a computer screen. Once you can see your thoughts in front of you, you can work with them and develop them. The following drawing can be helpful to you as an illustration of the various facets of a literary work, or ways of talking about it.

### Three Major Stages in Thinking and Writing: Discovering Ideas, Making Initial Drafts, and Completing the Essay

For both practiced and beginning writers alike, there are three basic stages of **composition**, and in each of these there are characteristic activities. In the **beginning** stage, writers try to find the details and thoughts that seem **to be right** for eventual inclusion in what they are hoping to write. The next (**or middle**) stage is characterized by written drafts, or sketches—ideas, **sentences**, paragraphs. The final or completion stage is the forming and **ordering** of what has previously been done—the creation and determination of a **final** essay. Although these stages occur in a natural order, they are not **separate** and distinct, but merge with each other and in effect are fused **together**. Thus, when you are close to finishing your essay you may find that **you need** something else, something more, and something different. At this point you can easily recreate an earlier stage to discover new details and ideas. You might say that your work is always tentative until you regard it as **finished** or until you need to turn it in.

#### Discovering Ideas (“Brainstorming”)

With the foregoing general goal in mind, let us assume that you have read the work about which you are to write and have made notes and observations on which you are planning to base your thought. You are now ready to consider and plan what to include in your essay. This earliest stage of writing is unpredictable and somewhat frustrating because you are on a search. You do not know quite what you want, for you are reaching **out** for ideas and you are not yet sure what they are and what you might **say** about them. This process of searching and discovery, sometimes also

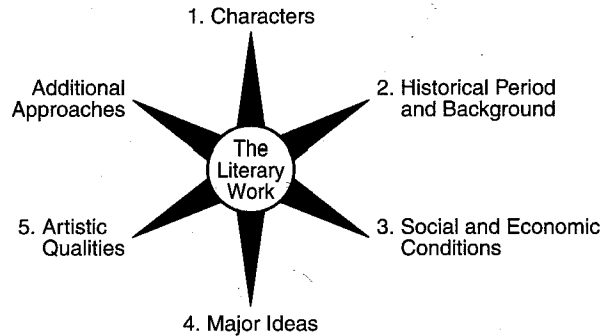


Consider the work you have read—story, poem, play—as the central circle, from which a number of points, like the rays of a star, shine out, some of them prominently, others less so. These points, or rays, are the various **subjects**, or topics, that you might decide to select in exploration, discovery, and discussion. Notice also that the points grow larger as they get nearer to the work, suggesting that once you select a point of discussion you may amplify that point with details and your own observations about the work.

You can consider literary works in many ways, but for now, as a way of **getting started**, you might choose to explore (1) the work’s characters; (2) **its** historical period and background; (3) the social and economic **conditions** it depicts; (4) its major ideas; or (5) any of its artistic qualities.<sup>2</sup> These **topics**, of course, have many subtopics, but any one of them can help **you in the** concentration you will need for beginning your essay (and **also for class-**room discussion). All you need is one topic, just one; don’t **try everything** at the same time. Let us see how our illustration can be revised **to account** for these topics. This time the number of points is reduced **to illustrate the points** or approaches we have just raised (with an additional and **unnamed** point to

<sup>2</sup>Together with additional topics, these critical approaches are discussed in more detail in Appendix A.

represent all the other approaches that might be used for other studies). These points represent your ways of discovering ideas about the work.



### *Study the Characters in the Work*

You need not be a practicing psychologist to discuss the persons or characters that you find in a work (see also Chapter 3). You need only to raise issues about the characters and what they do and what they represent. What are the characters like at the work's beginning? What happens to them? Do they do anything that causes them to change, and how are they changed? Are the changes for good or for bad? Why do the characters do the things they do? What do they do correctly? What do they do incorrectly? Why? For example, Mathilde is wrong not to tell Jeanne about her losing the necklace. Such an immediate admission of truth would save her and her husband ten years of hardship and deprivation. But Mathilde doesn't tell the truth. Why not? What do we learn about her character because she avoids or ignores this admission? Is her avoidance understandable? Why?

In discussing character, you might also wish to raise the issue of whether the people in the work do or do not do what might normally be expected from people in their circumstances. Do they correspond to type? The idea here is that certain attitudes and behaviors are typical of people at particular stages of life (e.g., children behaving like children, lovers dealing with their relationship, a young couple coping with difficult finances). Thus we might ask questions about whether the usual circumstances experienced by the characters affect them, either by limiting them in some way or by freeing them. What attitudes seem typical of the characters? How do these attitudes govern what the characters do, or don't do? For example, one of the most typical circumstances of life is marriage. According to the positive and ideal type of marriage, a husband and wife should be forthcoming with each other; they should tell each other things and should not conceal what is on their minds. If they have problems, they should discuss them and try to solve them together. In "The Necklace" we see that Mathilde and Loisel do not show these desired qualities, and their absence of communication can be seen as an

### **THE NEED TO PRESENT AN ARGUMENT WHEN WRITING ESSAYS ABOUT LITERATURE**

As you write about literature, you should always keep trying to connect your explanations to a specific **argument**; that is, you are writing about a specific work, but you are trying to *prove*—or *demonstrate*—a point or idea about it. This book provides you with a number of separate subjects relating to the study of literature. As you select one of these and begin writing, however, you are not to explain just that such-and-such a story has a character who changes and grows, or that such-and-such a poem contains the thought that nature creates great beauty. Rather, you should demonstrate the importance of your topic to the work as a whole in relation to a specific point or argument. One example of an argument might be that a story's first-person point of view permits readers to draw their own conclusions about the speaker's character. Another argument might be that the poet's thought is shown in a poem's details about the bustling sounds and sights of animals in springtime.

Let us therefore repeat and stress that your writing should always have an argumentative edge—a goal of **demonstrating the truth of your conclusions and clarifying and illuminating your idea about the topic and also about the work**. It is here that the accuracy of your choices of details from the work, the soundness of your conclusions, and the cumulative weight of your evidence are essential. You cannot allow your main ideas to rest on one detail alone, but must support your conclusions by showing that the bulk of material leads to them and that they are linked in a reasonable chain of fact and logic. It is such clarification that is the goal of argumentation.

element in their financial catastrophe. However, during their long years of trouble they work together, for they share a typical quality of honesty, and in this respect they fulfill their role, or type, as a married couple.

An analysis of typical attitudes themselves can also furnish you with material for discussion. For example, Mathilde, who is a member of the lower commercial class, has attitudes that are more appropriate to the upper or leisure class. She cannot bridge this gap, and her frustration causes her to nag her husband to give her enough money to live out her dream, if only for a moment.

### *Determine the Work's Historical Period and Background*

An obvious topic is the historical circumstances of the work. When was the work written? How well does it portray details about life at the time it appeared? What is historically unique about it? To what degree does it help you



learn something about the past that you did not previously know? What actions in the work are like or unlike actions going on at the present time? What truthfulness to life do you discover in the work? In “The Necklace,” for example, which was published more than a century ago, Mathilde’s duty is to stay at home as a housewife—a traditional role—while her husband is the family breadwinner. **After** the loss of the necklace she can no longer afford domestic help, and **she is compelled** to do all her own housework and her own shopping. She has **none of today’s** home conveniences such as a refrigerator, dishwasher, microwave, or car. Her husband, a clerk or secretary-copyist, spends his working day copying business records by hand, for at the period of the story there **were no** typewriters or word processors. Discussing matters like these **might also help** you with works written during modern times, because our **own assumptions**, artifacts, and habits will bear analysis and discussion.

### *Describe the Social and Economic Conditions Depicted in the Work*

**Closely related** to the historical period, an obvious topic to pursue in many **works is** the social and economic condition of the characters. To what level of **life, economically**, do the characters belong? How are events in the work **related to** their condition? How does their money, or lack of it, limit what they **do**? How do their economic circumstances either restrict or liberate their **imagination**s? How do their jobs and their apparent income determine their way **of life**? If we ask some of these questions about “The Necklace,” as we have **seen**, we find that Mathilde and her husband are greatly burdened by their **lack of** money, and also that their obligation to repay their huge loan drives **them into** economic want and sacrifice.

An important part of the social and economic analysis of literature is the consideration of female characters and what it means to be a woman. This is the **feminist analysis** of literature, which asks questions like these: What role is Mathilde compelled to take as a result of her sex and family background? How **does** Jeanne’s way of life contrast with that of Mathilde? What can Mathilde **do with** her life? To what degree is she limited by her role as a housewife? **Does** she have any chance of an occupation outside the home? How does her economic condition cause her to yearn for better things? What causes her to borrow the necklace? What is her contribution, as a woman, to the repayment of the loans? Should Mathilde’s limited life in “The Necklace” be considered as a political argument for greater freedom for women? Once you start asking questions like these, you will find that your thinking is developing along with your ideas for writing.

The feminist approach to the interpretation of literature has been well established, and it will usually provide you with a way to discuss a work. It is also possible, of course, to analyze what a work says about the condition of **being a man**, or being a child. Depending on the work, many of the questions **important** in a feminist approach are not dissimilar to those you might use if **you are** dealing with childhood or male adulthood.

One of the most important social and economic topics is that of race and ethnicity. What happens in the work that seems to occur mainly because of the race of the characters? Is the author pointing out any deprivations, any absence of opportunity, any oppression? What do the characters do under such circumstances? Do they succeed or not? Are they negative? Are they angry? Are they resolute and determined? Your aim in an inquiry of this type should be to concentrate on actions and ideas in the work that are clearly related to race.

### *Explain the Work’s Major Ideas*

One of the major ways of focusing on a work is to zero in on various ideas and values or issues to be discovered there. What ideas might we gain from the story of the lengthy but needless sacrifice and drudgery experienced by Mathilde and her husband? One obvious and acceptable idea is presented by the speaker, namely, that even the smallest, most accidental incident can cause immense consequences. This is an idea that we might expand and illustrate in an entire essay. Here are some other ideas that we also might pursue, all of them based on the story’s actions.

- Many actions have unforeseeable and uncontrollable consequences.
- Lack of communication is a major cause of hardship.
- Adversity brings out a character’s good qualities.
- Mutual effort enables people to overcome difficulties.

These ideas are all to be found in Maupassant’s story. In other works, of course, we may find comparable ideas, in addition to other major ideas and issues.

### *Learn About and Describe the Work’s Artistic Qualities*

A work’s artistic qualities provide many possible topics for studying, but basically here you may consider matters such as the work’s plan or organization and the author’s narrative method, writing style, or poetic techniques. Thus, in “The Necklace,” we observe that almost the entire story develops **with** Mathilde at the center (narrative method; see also Chapter 4, on point of **view**). At first, the story brings us close to Mathilde, for we are told of her **dissatisfaction** and impatience with her surroundings. As the story progresses, the storyteller/speaker presents her person and actions more objectively and also more distantly. Another artistic approach would be to determine the story’s pattern of development—how, chronologically, the loss of the necklace brings financial misfortune to the Loiseles. We might also look for the **author’s** inclusion of symbols in the story, such as the name of the street where the Loiseles originally live, their move to an attic flat, or the roughness of Mathilde’s hands as a result of her constant housework. There are many other ways to consider the formal aspects of a literary work.

## Assembling Materials and Beginning to Write

By this time you will already have been focusing on your topic and will have assembled much that you can put into your essay. You should now aim to develop paragraphs and sketches of what you will eventually include. You should think constantly of the point or argument you want to develop, but invariably **digressions** will occur, together with other difficulties—false starts, dead ends, total cessation of thought, digressions, despair, hopelessness, and general **frustration**. Remember, however, that it is important just to start. Jump right in and start writing anything at all—no matter how unacceptable your first **efforts** may seem—and force yourself to deal with the materials. The writing down of ideas does not commit you. You should not think that these first **ideas** are untouchable and holy just because you have written them on paper or on your computer screen. You can throw them out in favor of new ideas, you can make cross-outs and changes, and you can move paragraphs or even sections around as you wish. However, if you do not start writing, your first thoughts will remain locked in your mind and you will have nothing to work with. You must learn to accept the uncertainties in the writing process and make them work for you rather than *against* you.

### Build on Your Original Notes

You need to get your mind going by mining your notebook or computer file for useful things you have already written. Thus, let us use an observation in our original set of notes—"The attic flat is important," in reference to the poorer rooms where Mathilde and her husband live while they are paying back their creditors. With such a note as a start, you might develop a number of ideas to support an argument about Mathilde's character, as in the following:

The attic flat is important. Early in the story, in her apartment, Mathilde is dreamy and impractical. She seems delicate, but after losing the necklace, she is delicate no longer. She becomes a worker after they move to the flat. She does a lot more when living there.

In the flat, Mathilde has to sacrifice. She gives up her servant, washes greasy pots, climbs stairs carrying buckets of water, sloshes water around to clean floors, and does all the clothes washing by hand.

When living in the flat she gets stronger, but she also becomes loud and common. She argues with shopkeepers to get the lowest prices. She stops caring for herself. There is a reversal here, from incapable and well groomed to capable but coarse.

In this way, even in an assertion as basic as "The attic flat is important," the process of putting together details is a form of concentrated thought that leads you creatively forward. You can express thoughts and conclusions that you could not express at the beginning. Such an exercise in stretching your mind leads you to put elements of the work together in ways that create ideas for good essays.

## Trace Patterns of Action and Thought

You can also discover ideas by making a list or scheme for the story or **main** idea. What conflicts appear? Do these conflicts exist between people, **groups**, or ideas? How does the author resolve them? Is one force, idea, or side the **winner**? Why? How do you respond to the winner or to the loser? Using **this** method, you might make a list similar to this one:

At the beginning, Mathilde is a fish out of water. She dreams of wealth, but her life is drab and her husband is dull.

Fantasies make her even more dissatisfied; she punishes herself by thinking of a wealthy life.

When the Loiseles get the dinner invitation Mathilde pouts and whines. Her husband feels discomfort when she manipulates him into buying her an expensive party dress.

Her world of daydreams hurts her real life when her desire for wealth causes her to borrow the necklace. Losing the necklace is just plain bad luck.

These arguments all focus on Mathilde's character, but you may wish to trace other patterns you find in the story. If you start planning an essay about another pattern, be sure to account for all the actions and scenes that relate to your topic. Otherwise, you may miss a piece of evidence that could lead you to new conclusions.

### Raise and Answer Your Own Questions

A habit you should always cultivate is to raise and answer questions as you read. The *Guidelines for Reading* will help you formulate questions (pages 13–14), but you can raise additional questions like these:

- What is happening as the work unfolds? How does an action at the work's beginning bring about the work's later actions and speeches?
- Who are the main characters? What seems unusual or different about what they do in the work?
- What conclusions can you draw about the work's actions, scenes, and situations? Explain these conclusions.
- What are the characters and speakers like? What do they do and say about themselves, their goals, the people around them, their families, **their** friends, their work, and the general circumstances of their lives?
- What kinds of words do the characters use: formal or informal **words**, slang or profanity?
- What literary conventions and devices have you discovered, and **how** do these affect the work? (When an author addresses readers **directly**, for example, that is a convention; when a comparison is used, **that is a device**, which might be either a metaphor or a simile.)

Of course, you can raise other questions as you reread the piece, or you can be left with one or two major questions that you decide to pursue.

*Use the Plus-Minus, Pro-Con,  
or Either-Or Method for Putting Ideas Together*

A common and very helpful method of discovering ideas is to develop a set of contrasts: plus-minus, pro-con, either-or. Let us suppose a plus-minus method of considering the following question about Mathilde: Should she be “admired” (plus) or “condemned” (minus)?

**Plus: Admired?**

After she cries when they get the invitation, she recovers with a “strong effort”—maybe she doesn’t want her husband to feel bad.

She scores a great victory at the dance. She really does have the power to charm and captivate.

Once she loses the necklace, she and her husband become poor and deprived. But she does “her share . . . completely, heroically” (paragraph 98) to make up for the loss.

Even when she is poor, she dreams about that marvelous, shining moment at the great ball. This is pathetic, because Mathilde gets worse than she deserves.

At the end, after everything is paid back, and her reputation is secure, Mathilde confesses the loss to Jeanne.

**Minus: Condemned?**

She wants to be envied and admired only for being attractive and intriguing, not for more important qualities. She seems spoiled and selfish.

She wastes her time in daydreaming about things she can’t have, and she whines because she is unhappy.

Even though the Loisels live poorly, Mathilde manipulates her husband into giving her more money than they can afford for a party dress.

She assumes that her friend Jeanne would think her a thief if she admitted losing the necklace. Shouldn’t she have had more confidence in Jeanne?

She becomes loud and coarse and haggles about pennies, thus undergoing a cheapening of her person and manner.

By putting contrasting observations side by side in this way, you will find that ideas will start to come naturally and will be helpful to you when you begin writing, regardless of how you finally organize your essay. It’s possible, for example, that you might develop either column as the argumentative basis of an essay, or you might use your notes to support the idea that Mathilde is too complex to be either wholly admired or wholly condemned. You might also want to introduce an entirely new topic of development, such as that Mathilde should be pitied rather than condemned or admired. In short, arranging materials in the plus-minus pattern is a powerful way to discover ideas—a truly helpful habit of promoting thought—that can lead to ways of development that you do not at first realize.

*Use Your Writing to Develop Your Thinking*

You should always write down what you are thinking for, as a principle, unwritten thought is incomplete thought. Make a practice of writing your observations about the work, in addition to any questions that occur to you. This is an exciting step in preliminary writing because it can be useful when you write later drafts. You will discover that looking at what you have written not only can enable you to correct and improve the writing you have done, but also can lead you to recognize that you need more. The process goes just about like this: “Something needs to be added here—important details that my reader will not have noticed, new support for my argument, a new idea that has just occurred to me, a significant connection to link my thoughts.” If you follow such a process, you will be using your own written ideas to create new ideas. You will be advancing your own abilities as a thinker and writer.

The processes just described of searching for ideas, or brainstorming, are useful for you at any stage of composition. Even when you are fairly close to finishing your essay, you might suddenly recognize that you need to add something more (or subtract something you don’t like). When that happens, you may return to the discovery or brainstorming process to initiate and develop new ideas and new arguments.