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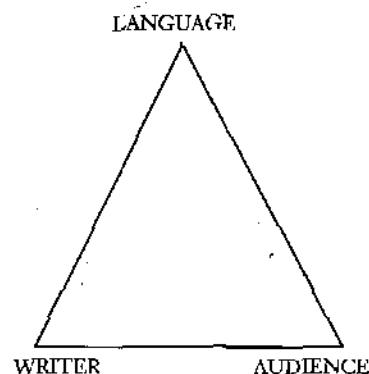
Writing About Literature

A well-known writer was once asked his opinion about a topic. He responded by saying that he could not possibly answer the question until he saw what he had written about it. The point is a particularly cogent one and very relevant to the composition of papers on literary topics: Essay-writing affords a reader the opportunity to organize ideas or responses, and to meditate deeply on the text or texts under consideration. Writing clarifies not only what is important about a text, illuminating what really matters to its construction, language, or meaning, but also what is important to the reader herself.

An essay, true to its origin in the French verb *essayer*, meaning “to try or attempt,” communicates its author’s efforts to convey his or her reflections about a text or group of texts. At the same time, these reflections constitute an attempt to persuade an audience of their interpretive validity and explanatory power. Writing about literature, therefore, is also writing about reading. But how to begin? What plan of attack will be most effective in conveying your ideas?

Getting Ready, Making Decisions

As your instructor will explain and as we outline in greater detail in Chapter 23, “Writing a Research Paper,” a writer needs to consider a number of questions before typing the first word: What audience am I addressing? What do they know about the text I want to discuss? What language will be most effective or appropriate in communicating to this audience? In other words, what assumptions should I make about the *rhetorical situation*? A writer always weighs these and other questions carefully before beginning, considering each point of the triangle below.



In preparing to write essays on literary topics, you should consider, among other things, who will read the paper and why. Assume that your audience is already familiar with the work you intend to discuss; thus, there is little reason to summarize the plot or rehearse the attractions or shortcomings of central characters if you are writing about a play or short story. Your audience knows, for example, that Hamlet meets a tragic fate and that Oedipus' last day as king of Thebes is not a happy one. What kind of language and evidence will be most effective in addressing this audience? What role do you as writer play? Generally, the answer is none at all. You are not a professor or academician, nor are you talking to a personal friend. You aren't in a locker room either, so select terms appropriate both to the occasion of the composition and the audience. This is especially true when crafting your thesis, the most significant aspect of your essay that your audience does *not* know.

The thesis embodies your purpose in writing the paper in the first place. Unlike, say, the occupation of a drama or film reviewer in a newspaper, your job in writing about literature is to persuade your audience of the significance of your topic to an understanding of the text you are discussing. The single statement most crucial to this enterprise is your *thesis statement*.

Thesis Statements

The thesis statement provides focus and purpose for the entire essay. Because it represents the most direct expression of your “big idea” about the literature you have read, the thesis statement may take longer to formulate than any other sentence you prepare. And it may take some time, some experimentation, and some trial-and-error before you arrive at the precise point you want to make. You may want to try such techniques as *freewriting* or *brainstorming*, where you put down on paper as quickly as you can whatever thoughts enter your mind about a topic. Don't stop to worry about punctuation or spelling—these can be corrected later. In a freewriting exercise, sometimes called “automatic writing,” simply transcribe your thoughts into words on a page or screen, revising them later into more precise and compelling statements. The purpose of this exercise is invention: You are trying to purge your mind of thoughts on a topic, one of which may be refined later into a thesis statement.

You might also consider the thesis statement as the culmination of a process that narrows the topic: from a text to discuss, to a topic in or about the text, to a specific issue or reading. Suppose that the text is E. M. Forster's “The Road from Colonus.” The subject or topic might be the story's imagery, and the thesis might argue for the importance of images of water. Or perhaps you have the opportunity to write about any aspect of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's “The Yellow Wall-Paper.” The subject might be characterization, and the thesis might focus on questions about the narrator's sanity. Is the narrator crazy? Or are her responses to the wallpaper logical given the circumstances of her confinement? Or given the story's implied critique of gender relations, does the wallpaper represent the patriarchal system from which the narrator tries to escape? The same story and the same process of narrowing the scope of what will become your argument could lead you to focus on a different subject and thesis.

Argument in this context is the correct term. You should select a topic that

you can develop into a persuasive argument, which begins with articulating a coherent, concise, and arguable thesis statement. Thesis statements have several distinctive features or criteria, as the following six points summarize. Test the thesis statement for your paper against these characteristics: Does your thesis meet all of the following? If not, what adjustments will make the statement more specific, more forceful, or more significant?

1. Thesis statements are statements of opinion, not statements of fact or intention.

Statement of Fact

In Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Birthmark," Aylmer meddles with nature.

As any reader of "The Birthmark" will readily concede, Aylmer does meddle with nature. Consequently, a research paper cannot be organized around a statement of this fact. Aylmer is a man who loves his wife, Boston is located in Massachusetts, and the Beatles are still popular—these facts do not require discussion or the presentation of evidence. They are self-evident.

Statement of Intention

In my essay, I want to show you that Aylmer meddles with nature.

This sentence is not better than the first one. It not only fails to advance an opinion, but also is wordier than the statement of fact: "In my essay, I want to show you that" is particularly ineffective and verbose.

Statement of Opinion

Since Aylmer is a perfectionist, his desire for perfection causes all of the story's unhappiness.

This sentence actually contains two opinions: that Aylmer is a perfectionist and that this perfectionism causes the events of the story to be unhappy. A number of the story's readers might disagree with both assertions, locating the story's motivations in problems of gender or scientific hubris. Often abstract terms like *unhappy* in the thesis spark disagreement or confusion, so be careful when inserting abstractions into theses. Nonetheless, this statement's assertion fits the first criterion of an effective thesis statement by stating an opinion, not a fact or intention.

2. A thesis statement advances an opinion about which informed and reasonable people might disagree. As is the case with the statement that Aylmer is a perfectionist, a thesis furthers an understanding about which informed readers might disagree. What would be the point of researching a topic about which everyone already possesses the same opinion? What would a reader of the paper learn that he or she does not know already? Thus, one way of testing a thesis is to present it to your classmates and determine if they all share your view. If they do, you need to keep working.

3. A thesis statement often contains an underlying rhetorical premise. By *rhetorical premise* we mean a concept or mode of understanding that implicitly structures or organizes the rest of the paper. In the 1960s, the rhetorician Randall Decker published a widely used textbook called *Patterns of Exposition*, which included chapters on comparison, process analysis, causality, definition, classification, and other rhetorical modes or premises. Such premises are frequently imbedded in the articulation of theses: Mr. Lucas's loss of insight in E. M. Forster's "The Road from Colonus" progresses through two distinct stages (this essay will follow the organizational strategy of process analysis); "The young boy's sudden insight at the end of James Joyce's 'Araby' is caused by the deflation of his fantasy" (this essay uses the organizational strategy of causality), and so on.

4. A thesis statement predicts, obligates, and controls what follows it. Rhetorician William Irmischer once made this point in a composition textbook, and its implications are still relevant today. Much like the title, a thesis suggests to a reader what course a research paper—or any essay, for that matter—will take. It *predicts*. It also *obligates* the writer to present evidence and discussion of the evidence consistent with the assertion; a writer cannot begin by claiming that Mr. Lucas experiences two distinct stages of loss, and then later argue that there are, in fact, four stages to his failure of insight. Finally, a thesis *controls* the kinds of evidence relevant to the essay's purpose. If the thesis addresses Mr. Lucas's loss of insight, then considering his daughter's motivations or the fate of the villagers would seem digressive unless they can be shown to contribute to his loss of perspective.

5. A thesis statement takes on a topic of significance, often the answer to an implicit question. Many graduate students we know, parodying a well-known Victorian writer's phrases the "Everlasting Yea" and the "Everlasting Nay," talk about the "The Everlasting So What?" This means, simply, that a thesis should argue a point of importance. "Mr. Lucas's loss of insight progresses through two stages"—so what? Why is this important? Notice, too, that all the examples we have used answer an unasked or implicit question, a "how" or "why" question: Why is the young boy in "Araby" so self-critical at the story's conclusion?

6. A thesis statement reflects theoretical or other assumptions that underlie your reading and, finally, the argument of the essay. All of the sample theses so far are based more or less on *formalist* premises: How is the plot constructed? How might a character's actions be explained? Why or how is an image, scene, or even a single word important to our understanding? Such questions quite properly involve close reading of the literary text, as they address one or more aspects of literary form. But, of course, as many of the chapters of *Understanding Literature* outline, other kinds of readings—and other premises for thesis statements—exist. They arise, in part, by asking different questions of the text: How is race or sexuality represented? How is social class or capitalism depicted? How does psychoanalytic theory, Marx's

social theory, or feminist thought help explain a character's action or predicament? In other words, literature is more than a self-contained aesthetic object—or, to borrow a metaphor—it is more than an exceptionally “well-wrought urn.” A literary text is also a social text, a historical artifact, a product made in a specific place, time, and culture. It can tell us much about these cultures and times as well.

These are, admittedly, difficult concepts that often lead to difficult questions and challenging thesis statements. But they must be asked and answered, because no writer—or reader—wants to waste his or her time on a topic of little consequence. If your paper addresses the actions of an important character, the implications of a major event or a significant *motif* (repetition in a poem, play, or story), then this close reading is likely to be important enough to make. If your essay concerns a matter of representation—how Africans are portrayed in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, how the city is represented in modernist fiction, how postmodern writers employ references to commodity culture—the chances are you can focus this interest into a significant thesis statement and thus respond effectively to the “Everlasting So What?”

And there's one other bit of good news, too—you're probably ready to write.

Writing

But how do you begin? If you're at all like the authors of this textbook, then you've probably asked yourself this very question scores of times. A thesis statement might be introduced in any number of ways, but it is actually easier to identify ways *not* to begin. The advice of rhetorician William Irmischer is again helpful in explaining three opening strategies to avoid at all costs.

1. The “panoramic” historical gesture. We've all read sentences like this one and tried to suppress our groans: “Since the dawn of time, man has pondered the nature of _____.” This sentence is so trite and predictable that you can fill in the blank with any number of terms: *love, men, women, life*, and so on. But if it really is true that humans have puzzled over such weighty and complex matters for millennia, what chance do you have of resolving the matter in three to five pages? Obviously, this opening strategy—and that's what we are discussing, a strategy or tactic to present the thesis—has now lapsed into a parody of a profound utterance more likely to elicit laughter than respect.

The problem is, when you've stared into a blank computer screen for an hour, a sentence like this one starts to sound better and better—better than nothing. It isn't.

2. The appeal to Mr. Webster. Whenever a writer is really strapped for an opening gambit, this sentence starts to sound better as well: “According to *Webster's Dictionary*, realism is defined as . . .” Like the “panoramic” opener—and the “fact” that grandparents tend to die on the very day papers are due in a class like this one—this strategy has been overused. More important, the dic-

tionary provides only a basic understanding of a term, its common meanings or denotations. Literary perceptions of a term like *realism* are far more complex and historically contingent than the definitions in most dictionaries.

3. Irrelevant biographical detail. Young writers sometimes feel that literary understanding always begins with the biography of the author; consequently, they begin essays with hackneyed sentences: “Samuel Beckett was born in Dublin, Ireland, in 1906.” Fine. But save in the specific instance in which biography impinges directly upon reading, such a fact is not only superfluous, but irrelevant.

This was not always the case, which perhaps explains why the appeal to biography remains an attractive option for some students. In early twentieth-century British and American literary criticism, for example, biography often comprised the center around which interpretation revolved. In *The Human Approach to Literature* (1933), for example, William Freeman began a discussion of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* this way: “Geoffrey Chaucer, the sturdily-built man with the friendly brown eyes, was not merely a widely traveled Englishman who had passionately preserved his nationality, but a Londoner by birth and breeding.”

Today, such opening strategies fail to introduce the real purpose of the essay and seem, well, almost silly. Chaucer's buff physique might be interesting, but surely it is not pertinent to a reading of his work. So why go there?

Fortunately, some devices *are* effective in introducing a thesis. You might begin with an epigraph, a brief quotation that encapsulates issues you feel are important to the text, and return to it in your opening paragraph (and later). You might start with a sensational detail, an anecdote, or a brief exchange of dialogue when discussing a play. Or, you might follow the instructions of countless composition texts by replicating the narrowing process discussed earlier, moving from a general subject, to a topic, to a specific statement.

The point is this: Thesis statements require introductions. The background of your “big idea” needs to be elaborated early in the essay and then, after your thesis is stated, you are ready to build a support structure for it. This is the body or argument of the essay.

Arguments and Admissible Evidence: Paraphrase and Quotation

Much like a lawyer in a criminal case who introduces materials into evidence and then “reads” the evidence in an attempt to persuade a judge or jury, writers of literary criticism marshal evidence carefully and discuss its implications. Persuasive arguments rely on well-chosen pieces of evidence and incisive analysis. The best kind of evidence is located in the literary text itself, parts of which will need to be summarized and paraphrased in the argument. For further discussion of paraphrase, see Chapter 23, “Writing a Research Paper.”

But perhaps the most difficult task facing writers of all ages and experience is quoting from the text; that is, there will be occasions when a paraphrase or summary will not serve your needs. You will need to quote the

original. But when? How much should you quote? What are the most graceful methods of integrating quoted excerpts into your own prose?

Let's take up this last question. In general, the same formula that makes for a good legal argument—evidence + analysis = guilt or innocence—applies in writing essays about literature. A prosecutor, for example, doesn't throw a weapon on a table and claim, "You see—that proves the defendant is guilty." Rather, a prosecutor examines the evidence, then builds an argument about it: Forensic analysis proves this is the murder weapon; the gun is registered to the defendant, who had a motive to kill the victim; the defendant was witnessed at the scene of the murder minutes before, and so on. If the lawyer is lucky, she might have eyewitnesses to depose, hair fibers or DNA evidence to present and discuss, and more: evidence + analysis = case. *The same is true of building literary arguments: textual evidence (quotations or paraphrases) + your analysis = an argument.*

To bring this to an even smaller, more precise case, consider the following:

your writing + quoted excerpts = complete sentence.

In other words, when quoting from a literary text don't simply drop a quotation between sentences; work to incorporate it into your sentence just as you attempt to integrate the piece of evidence into a larger argument. A citation should appear at the end of a quoted passage of any length (over a phrase or two), and usually this means that the citation appears at the end of a sentence. That is, try not to interrupt the sense of the sentence by placing page citations in the middle of clauses.

There are at least three proven ways of quoting effectively from a literary text.

1. Identification of the speaker + quotation. This method is employed in both popular and academic writing, usually for passages of four lines or less. Example: In Salman Rushdie's "At the Auction of the Ruby Slippers," the narrator explains, "We, the public, are easily, lethally offended. We have come to think of taking offense as a fundamental right. We value very little more highly than our rage, which gives us, in our opinion, the moral high ground." The positioning of the identification may be manipulated in any way that reads smoothly; for example, the narrator of "At the Auction of the Ruby Slippers" observes, "We the public, are easily, lethally offended." Again, variety of structure will enhance the readability of your essay. Don't begin every quotation with "The narrator says. . . ."

Because the introduction of the quotation specifies the origin of the passage, there is no need to identify it a second time by citing the author's name or the work's title in parenthesis. If, however, the identification fails to make this clear, then the author's name should appear in the citation. A full bibliographic entry should appear at the end of your paper in a section entitled "Works Cited."

2. The "block quotation" for longer excerpts. Any passage greater than four lines should be set off from the paragraph by indenting on the left side, a

method that renders quotation marks themselves superfluous. Lines taken from stories should be quoted exactly as they appear in the original. Paragraph numbers, not page numbers, should be cited. For example, the narrator of Dorothy Parker's "The Waltz" reveals her attitude toward her oafish partner through a stream of running dialogue that contrasts with the dancers' actual conversation:

Oh, they're going to play another encore. Oh, goody. Oh that's lovely. Tired? I should say I'm not tired. I'd like to go on like this forever.

I should say I'm not tired. I'm dead, that's all I am. Dead, and in what a cause! And the music is never going to stop playing, and we're going on like this, Double-Time Charlie and I, throughout eternity. I suppose I won't care any more, after the first hundred thousand years. I suppose nothing will matter then, not heat nor pain nor broken heart nor cruel, aching weariness. Well. It can't come too soon for me. (17)

Note that, as in the above case, you must introduce the quotation, not simply "drop" it in the sentence.

In the example, a longer quotation is introduced by a complete sentence. But your responsibilities do not end here, because the quotation needs to be considered or "unpacked" thoroughly. After all, if the passage did not contain specific language that supports your argument, you would not have introduced it into evidence in the first place. Here, again, a balance between admissible evidence and your analysis is important. Remember: Quoting at length generally means discussing at length. This is entirely consistent with the logic that should inform your selection of the passage to quote: The very issues that led you to select the passage need to be conveyed to your reader.

3. Quoted phrases or "sound bites." Often you may want to quote only a word or phrase from the original. No problem. In these instances, take bits or "bites" of texts and work them smoothly into the syntax of your sentence. One suggestion might help: After quoting the bites, pretend that the quotation marks aren't there—that the bits are merely words in your sentence. Does it read smoothly and clearly as a sentence? If so, you have probably integrated the quoted excerpts well into your prose.

Examples

Author of the most "enthusiastically applauded" writings by a black American, James Baldwin speaks "in an 'engaged' Black voice (Baker 63).

Commenting that Mark Leyner was "perhaps the most notable embodiment of the 'avant-pop' sensibility of the nineties," Larry McCaffery suggests that Leyner's style is a "new form of 'realism'" (220).

In *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow describes Mr. Kurtz as "at least seven feet long" with a "deep voice" (280, 281).

Note here that all three examples, in addition to crafting sentences that accommodate the quotations, employ different strategies of citation. The first example includes both a name and page number because the context does not

identify the author of the quotation. The second example includes only a page number because the author's name—Larry McCaffery—is specified. The citation for the third example explains that the two phrases appear on different pages in the original.

In conclusion, select evidence carefully and present it in a meaningful pattern or logical order: Have you arranged it chronologically, in the order events occur in the literature you are discussing? Or have you elected to present the evidence in another way: from the least compelling example to the most compelling? From the easiest point to prove to the most difficult? In some other way? Paraphrase or summarize events as part of your argument—relevant events that provide a background or context for the specific argument you hope to build. When the language of the original is striking or so perfectly stated for your argument that you want to introduce it into evidence, follow the instructions we have just outlined. Last but not least, make certain that you have quoted *accurately*: word for word, punctuation mark for punctuation mark. Also, use the quotation fairly; in other words, make sure that it represents what you take to be the intent of the original.

If you do all of these things, there is an excellent chance the argument of your essay—your attempt at persuading your reader of the validity and importance of your thesis—will be successful.

Concluding

Like the creation of an effective introduction, the drafting of effective conclusions often poses a challenge. And, like trite introductions, ineffective conclusions are fairly easy to describe. Here's the worst:

And, in conclusion, I have just shown you that Chester Himes's "Lunching at the Ritzmore" is about race relations.

Why is this such a weak statement? For several reasons. First, in a brief paper of three to five pages, it's fairly easy to determine that you are heading for a conclusion; you don't need to announce this. Second, the reader will decide whether you've made the case or not; the statement "I have just shown you" may in fact be inaccurate, because you might *not* have succeeded in making the case persuasively. Last, other than bringing the argument to a close, what is gained by this kind of sentence?

Fortunately, better concluding strategies exist. You might restate the thesis and offer a brief suggestion of its implications—or of matters related to the thesis that could not be admitted into your argument. Why is the thesis significant? What intellectual purchase or insight does it allow your reader? Such a tactic should not lead to a lengthy digression; rather, a strong thesis possesses a quality of interpretive richness that often exceeds the limits of the essay. Thus, in your conclusion you might outline briefly what other kinds of issues will be better understood because of your thesis statement. You might return to the epigraph or startling fact with which your essay began (assuming you employed one of these strategies). Or you might speculate briefly on

how the field of evidence might have been expanded had you been afforded the opportunity of doing so.

Whatever strategy you use, remember that, like introductions, your conclusion for a short essay need not be overly elaborate. But you *do* need to bring the argument to closure.

Revision and Final Thoughts

Be sure to leave ample time to proofread your essay, which—we know—is advice easier to give than follow. Procrastination is the great enemy of revision. If you wait to begin your paper the night before it is due, the revision process will inevitably be compromised—or just totally nuked! So, get started early.

Then, after you have produced a rough draft, begin your revision process strategically. Does your essay satisfy the requirement of the assignment your instructor gave you? Is the title effective? Next, proceed to the largest elements of composition: arguments and paragraphs. Is the argument delineated in a logical and persuasive order? Are the paragraphs coherent, with immediately relevant topic sentences, evidence, and analysis? Is there an effective balance between evidence and discussion? Have you varied the lengths of quotations and your methods of introducing them? Have you created effective transitions between paragraphs and points of the argument?

Then, move to smaller matters, beginning with the problems your instructor has identified in previous essays. These differ from one writer to the next. Some have difficulty with sentence construction, others with phrasing and word choice, still others with spelling and punctuation. Recognize those areas of composition that have caused you difficulty in the past and revise them carefully. When writing on literary topics, again, accuracy is a crucial matter: Check every quotation against the original and make certain the citations are accurate. Also, be sure that you have followed your instructor's requirements in terms of pagination, presentation, and so on.

With any luck, this essay will prove a learning experience for you. How will you know what you think until you've seen what you have written?