

Writing the Literary Essay

A Basic Guide to Structure, Style, & Grammar

Defining the Literary Essay

- The literary essay is a type of academic essay.
- The academic essay is composed of 3 parts: introduction, body, and conclusion.
- The purpose of the academic essay is to communicate your views of a topic to a specific audience. In the literary essay, that purpose is narrowed to include fictional literature.

The Purpose of the Literary Essay

According to Thomas Arp and Greg Johnson, "In writing about literature, your object generally is to convince your reader that your understanding of a work is valid and important and to lead them to share that understanding. . .readers of essays about literature usually look for "proof." They want you to show them *how* the work, or the element you are discussing, does what you claim it does" (10-11).

From Perrine's *Literature: Structure, Sound & Sense*, 10th edition

Proving Your Position

- Supporting your interpretation of a literary work is vital. Academic essays do not rely on *opinion* but demand *logical evidence*.
- Some assignments require the writer only deal with **primary sources**. A primary source would be the work being interpreted. An essay on *Hamlet* would use *Hamlet* as a primary source.
- Some assignments require **secondary sources** – those written about the primary source or about the particular issue being discussed. An essay on *Hamlet* would use books, articles, videos, and reference works about literature, Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, or other relevant topics to support the writer's interpretation.

The Introduction

- The introduction of a literary essay should always include the name of the author, title of the work, and genre of the work that you are writing about.
 - In Susan Glaspell's play, *Trifles*...
 - In "The Road Not Taken," a poem by Robert Frost,...

The Introduction

- The introduction should announce your purpose in a sentence we call the thesis.
- The thesis has 2 major parts: **the subject** (what you are writing about) and **the attitude** (what you are saying about the subject):
 - **Characterization and irony** in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" **help convey O'Connor's theme** that perhaps we should first be good men ourselves rather than judging others.

The Introduction

- For long essays, a standard component of the introduction is a very brief plot summary. The summary tells the essential plot elements of the literary work in the writer's own words, using MLA signal-outs.
- For short essays, or essay exam answers, you do not include a summary unless the assignment specifically requires one.
- If unclear, always ask the teacher for clarification.

The Introduction as Blue Print

- Often, the introduction acts as a blue print for the paper, letting the reader know what is to come, and the order in which you will arrange the information.
- You will also indicate your method of organization, such as comparison/contrast.
- Whatever you announce in the introduction, you must cover it in the essay. Be sure your introduction at the end of the writing process reflects exactly what you've ended up writing about.

The Body

- The body is where writers present their evidence to support their thesis. We call this developing the theme of the essay.
- For an academic essay, the writer must present at least two points of support. You will develop each point in a body paragraph.
- The first sentence of each body paragraph should clearly support some part of the thesis. We call these topic sentences.

Topic Sentences

- Like the thesis, the topic sentence has a subject and attitude, only it reflects a portion of the thesis. Take our sample thesis: **Characterization and irony in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" help convey O'Connor's theme that perhaps we should first be good men ourselves rather than judging others.** We will find our topic sentences here.
 - O'Connor uses characterization to reveal the hypocrisy of the grandmother.
 - Irony is another method O'Connor uses to show how people's actions reveal their true nature.

Developing the Topic Sentence

- Once you have expressed your topic sentence, you now need to prove your point.
- **Define terms:** if you are using a literary term, like **characterization** or **irony**, you should define it for your reader. You should use class materials first, such as the **glossary** in your literary anthology or **handouts** from the teacher, before turning to a more generic source like a common dictionary.

Developing the Topic Sentence

- **Explanation:** You will now explain your point to your reader. How does characterization convey hypocrisy? How is irony used?
- **Examples:** After explaining, you will provide one or more references to the literature itself to show us where in the text you see this played out. You can do this by **quoting** or **summarizing**.

To Quote or Not to Quote...

- MLA cautions writers to devote no more than **20%** of the paper to quotations.
- **Summary** is usually the preferred method of incorporating outside sources in an essay because it allows for the writer to maintain personal voice, tone, and style.
- **Quotations** are powerful, though, when the words themselves reveal an important character trait, theme, perspective, etc.
- Another reason to use quotation is if the author's words create an impact that helps make your point. If summary would lessen this impact, then you should turn to quotation.
- Whether summarizing or quoting, you must always use **MLA documentation** to credit the source.

Developing the Body

- **Transition:** This is the last step in a body paragraph. Transitions help wrap up the paragraph's point and move the reader to the next stage of the essay.
- Writers use transitions throughout the essay to create **coherence** and **cohesion** between their sentences, paragraphs, and ideas.
- **Examples:** for example, on the other hand, first, next, after, two days later, before, in contrast, ultimately.

The Conclusion

- This paragraph ends the essay. The first element in a conclusion is traditionally a **restatement** of the thesis. You never copy the thesis exactly as it appears in the introduction, but you do want to remind your reader of the overall point of your essay.
- Your conclusion is a place to show the **significance** of your thesis – why your interpretation is important or unique.

MLA Style Documentation

- Throughout your essay, you will be documenting your sources using MLA style. Please refer to the PowerPoint presentation "MLA Documentation for Literary Classes" available on the website.
- Remember:
 - All sources in your essay need a **parenthetical notation**, the **signal-out**.
 - All sources must be documented on the **works cited page** at the end of the essay.
 - Failure to do this will result in **plagiarism**.

Grammar & Mechanics

- College-level writing requires proficiency in grammar and mechanics.
- The diction level for college writing is formal or relaxed formal (allows for contractions).
- Students must **revise** (reconsider their thesis, organization, use of examples, etc.), **edit** (check for spelling mistakes, sentence errors, formatting errors), and **check MLA**. These should be separate steps.

Grammar & Mechanics

- The five most common grammar mistakes students make are:
 - **Sentence boundary errors:** comma splices, run-ons, and fragments.
 - **Point of view errors:** Students use 1st or 2nd person when they should only use 3rd person in literary essays unless the assignment specifies otherwise.
 - **Wordiness:** student writing rambles, is full of redundancies, does not use precise language.
 - **Poor verb choice:** overuse of the verbs to be, to do, to get, to have. Students overlook more interesting and precise verb choices.
 - **Poor proofreading:** students do not spell check or edit their writing for mistakes.



Grammar and Mechanics

- For help with these problems, check out the class Cruiser page for handouts, guides, and PowerPoint presentations as well as outside sources.
- Not all literature classes will have outside sources available.