

**Essay Writing Guidelines**  
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**Paper Format**

Please write your paper according to the principles outlined in the MLA Manual of Style.

Use MLA format for your first page, page numbering, etc. etc.

Purdue University MLA Citation site  
<https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/747/08/>

And the subject-specific site for writing on literature

<https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/section/4/17>

MLA Sample Paper from the Purdue OWL

<https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/747/13/>

**Thesis Statement**

You must have one of these. Think of it as the sentence(s) in which you state your case to the reader. It is also a way to pose an answer to a intellectual question or problem that has emerged out of your reading of a text or set of texts.

Remember: you might not find out what your "thesis" is until you get to the end of your first draft. Once you have a specific argument go back to that first paragraph and revise it to indicate what your paper argues.

**A thesis statement is not:** Dante Gabriel's "Jenny" (1870) and Augusta Webster's "The Castaway" (1870) are both similar and different in their use of the dramatic monologue form.

Sometimes a "thesis statement" can take up two sentences or even an entire paragraph if it is particularly complex. Avoid sweeping generalizations both in the thesis statement and in the introductory paragraph.

Use textual evidence to support your thesis. You must draw upon specific details from the text to "prove" your argument. Sometimes this might require a lengthy quote, sometimes you might need to simply drop in a phrase.

**Paragraph Structure**

Make sure that each sentence is manifestly connected to the ones that precede it and follow it. Revise for continuity of argument and effective transitions between sentences and between paragraphs.

## Quotations

It is very easy to let the quotations do all of the work in a critical essay. In order to avoid this particular temptation, you might want to set yourself a general rule: **for every two sentences of prose (or two lines of poetry) you must have at least one sentence of analysis. Do not assume that the quotes can do all of the work.**

## Indenting

When your quote is longer than two sentences of prose or three lines of poetry, it should be set off by indenting. If you are quoting poetry be sure to keep the line lengths exactly as they are in the original. Do not use quotation marks around an indented passage.

There should be:

no quotation marks

double-spacing

the period comes after the final sentence quoted and not after the parenthetical citation

an italicized or underlined title surrounded by parentheses and followed by the page number (or numbers)

See Purdue MLA site for rules for quotation:

<https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/747/03/>

## Embedding

A quotation of one line of verse, or part of a line, should be enclosed in quotation marks and run in as part of your text. If parts of two lines of verse are run in to the text, indicate the line break with a slash (/)

Example 1. In Christina Rossetti's "The Lowest Room," the speaker thrills at the adventures of Homer's Iliad, claiming that "those days were golden days, / Whilst these are days of dross" (34-35).

Example 2. According to Wollstonecraft, "Asylums" and "Magdalenes" treat merely the symptoms of a society which fails to teach its children the difference between "virtue and vice" (Vindication 72). "It is justice, not charity, that is wanting in the world!" (71), Wollstonecraft exclaims.

At the end of an embedded quotation, a period or comma is placed outside of the parentheses that contain the citation.

Note that there are three pieces of information you need when citing a text: 1) author 2) title and 3) location of the quote. If you note the name and title in the passage (or it is otherwise obvious from context) than it does not appear in the parenthetical citation.

## Other Issues

### Analyze:

- In a critical paper your job is to analyze the text and construct a theory as to what it all "means." There is consequently little room (if any) for the three most common evils of the critical essay: 1) summarizing when you want to analyze 2) describing your "feelings" rather than laying out your analytical "proofs" and 3) relying upon a very broad and general discussion which never settles down to serious textual analysis; never assume anything is "obvious."

### Details you must not forget:

- In the first paragraph (or the first time you mention a work) you must note the author's name, the title of the work, and the date (which might appear in parentheses). There are many different methods of getting this information into the first paragraph but you must do it in some manner.

**Indicate titles of books** (including books of poetry,) novels, plays, and movies with either italics or by underlining it: (i.e. *Lyrical Ballads*, *Frankenstein*, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*)

**Indicate titles of book chapters, articles, short poems, songs, and essays with quotation marks:** (i.e. "Kubla Khan," "The Cockney School of Poets")

**Do not begin a sentence with the word "This":** Be specific in your language.

**Avoid "sweeping generalizations":** "England in 1819" is a very thought-provoking poem which deals with Shelley's attitudes toward politics.

**Revise for repeated words:** If you use the word "imagination" more than twice in two sentences you need to figure out other ways in which to describe what you mean.

**Be concise!** Remember you have page limit restrictions that you must work within. Present your argument and prove it.

**Avoid slang and linguistic constructions which occur most commonly in spoken English.**

### **Vary Sentence Length**

**Use Active Verb Constructions.** As a general rule of thumb avoid the "to be" verb whenever possible.

Weak: "The reason I like the play is because Nora walks out the door."

Strong: "I like the play because Nora walks out the door"

Weak: "In the afternoon a sharp drop in the temperature occurred."

Strong: "The temperature dropped sharply in the afternoon."

Weak: "It is said that power is corrupting."

Strong: "Power corrupts."

**A colon introduces a formal enumeration or list, a long quotation, or an explanatory statement.**

- A semi-colon is used to separate principle clauses, as in the following example: "I do not say that these stories are untrue; I only say that I do not believe them." You also use a semi-colon to separate elements in a series when the elements contain internal commas, as in the following sentence: "One day of orientation was led by Mr. Joseph, the chaplain; Mrs. Smith, a French teacher; and the Dean."

**Always proofread your paper after you have run a spellcheck program.**

**Construct a "Works Cited" page if you have consulted any outside materials.**

**En-Title your paper.**

- A title should entice your reader into reading the essay by suggesting the essay's content. It should also note the author(s) and the title(s) of the work(s) you will be discussing. (i.e. "Power in Percy Shelley's "Mont Blanc": the Poet as Servant and Usurper"). Rules of grammar still apply!

In addition to the MLA Handbook, the following texts were used in preparing this handout:  
Langdon Elsbree, et. al. *The Heath Handbook of Composition* and John Trimble, *Writing with style: Conversations on the art of writing*

Link to [Dr. Eberle's Powerpoint on Writing a Literary Essay](#)