

Writing a Literary Essay

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Pre-writing

When responding to an essay prompt (or working without one), remember that it is up to you to design a well-supported **argument**.

An essay prompt merely gives you a place to begin; it is your job to construct a thesis, which can be longer than a single sentence. Best to start thinking about your first paragraph as a **thesis paragraph**.

Sometimes you actually might start off with a tentative thesis but most of the time you only have an idea. What do you do when you start off with an "idea"? What is the difference between a "thesis" and an "idea" (we might also think of this as a "topic")

Re-read; take notes; formulate grounds of argument

What kinds of topics are good ones?

<https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/618/02/>

One Strategy (which will work either with an essay prompt *or* when working without one)

- Pick up to three larger topics that might be fruitful for analysis. What's interesting, significant, strange, or revealing in this text? NOTE that you won't be writing on all of these topics. Ultimately you should pick one (or maybe two if they're related) as the focus of your essay, but if you're casting about for ideas, you can explore each topic to see which one "works."
- Now make a list of details (evidence) from the story that relate to one of these larger topics. Quote specifics from your text.
- Now fill in the blank as many times as possible for the first piece of evidence: This detail might suggest _____. THIS is the interpretation.

(When you're finished – move on to the next piece of evidence, and so on . . .)

Now, look over your work. Which topic seems to have the most interesting evidence? Remember that it's better in the body of your essay to have ten statements about one piece of evidence than ten pieces of evidence with one statement.

You may not want to choose the topic with the MOST evidence, but the **one that interests you** the most when you wrote your interpretation.

Ultimately, use this work to help you generate a thesis statement that "zooms in" on a feature of the text and makes a claim about it (i.e. [The author] uses _____ in order to _____"). You'll want your thesis to be specific and complex.

You need to be prepared to revise your thesis after you've finished drafting your essay. The act of writing itself generates new ideas and new arguments but the finished essay needs to present a focused and consistent argument.

Integrating Secondary Sources into your argument

Unless your thesis begins by responding quite specifically to a critical essay, you should start with the primary source material (i.e. *Pride and Prejudice*), as noted above. After you've developed your argument into a thesis, you can put your analysis in conversation with other voices, enriching and complicating your own assertions about the text.

When your thesis begins as a response to another argument, you will find yourself working back and forth between primary and secondary sources. Your goal is to both articulate your point of departure from the secondary source(s) and draw from the primary source for evidence that supports your analysis of the text.

Thesis Statement and First Paragraphs

At this point in your writing career, a “thesis sentence” is usually inadequate. Instead your “thesis statement” might consist of the entire first paragraph, in which you describe your argument to the reader.

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: “Elizabeth and Darcy are both proud and prejudiced.” nor is “*Pride and Prejudice* is about nineteenth-century England.”

Use textual evidence to support your thesis *even in the first paragraph*. You must draw upon specific details from the text to "prove" your argument. On some occasions this might require a lengthy quote, sometimes you might need to simply drop in a phrase. Never get so caught up in the idea of creating suspense that you fail to articulate your argument in the first paragraph.

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.

A thesis is always a two-part proposition:

It has a **major premise**, which is your position on the subject. Do not oversimplify that premise. You might begin with the following:

Pride and Prejudice is a novel about nineteenth-century England.

But you need to be more specific and more complex in your thesis and in the essay as a whole. Make sure that you also answer the “how” and the “so what,” which moves the thesis in the direction of argument and analysis.

Pride and Prejudice critiques nineteenth-century England’s gendered legal practices, specifically entailment and coverture. It does so by deploying a narrative voice that both overtly and covertly satirizes things as they are, and in its conclusion, which positions the “teasing” Elizabeth Bennett within the halls of power.

A statement of your reading of a work of literature: but it must answer the "so what?" question and "how" question?

Three Checks of Your Draft Thesis:

- 1. Is it limited enough in scope for your assigned paper length? Or, the corollary question: Can this thesis sustain itself for the assigned paper length? [This question should get answered in the prewriting phase as you accumulate your data.]**
- 2. Are you specific enough in the thesis itself?**
 - Always go beyond an observation.
 - When writing a comparative essay, go beyond noting the ways that two events (or characters) are "similar" or "different" and instead say **exactly** why they share some elements and differ in others **and** then discuss what the significance of those shared or differing element actually is according to your analysis.
 - Don't worry about signaling your argument to the reader; you **should signpost** your argument. You want to give the reader something to read for: specifically, you want to set up the grounds of your argument and then go on to systematically prove it
- 3. Is your thesis arguable? Is there evidence to support your reading? [again this gets answered in the prewriting phase]**

DO NOT LET THE DRAFT THESIS DETERMINE WHAT YOU FIND!

Your argument should emerge out of what you find in the text (or texts). It may be that after writing your first few drafts, you determine that your thesis needs revision.

Problems in Thesis Statements:

The "Safari" thesis: A thesis statement that takes us on a tour of a novel's patterns.

For example, “Anne Radcliffe’s novel uses supernatural imagery to make the novel mysterious.”

The **Safari** thesis takes the reader on a tour of the text's themes: "Anne Finch and Mary Astell are interested in improving education for women."

The "**Low Hanging Fruit**" thesis: A thesis statement with a claim, but it's too obvious. For example, "Early eighteenth-century poets wrote in a very different environment than late eighteenth-century poets."

The "Just the Facts" thesis: Closely related to the "Safari" thesis, but even worse. You can't develop a fact, so you have no where to go except summary. For example, "Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's published letters describe her travels in Turkey."

Specify, specify, specify!

**Don't focus on "what's going on" in the text or what it says.
In other words, don't summarize.**

The "vaguebooking" thesis: A thesis statement that relies on sweeping generalizations ("society"), cliches ("eternal power of love"), or unspecified literary devices ("X is conveyed by imagery and careful diction"). Like vaguebooking, it leaves the reader with more questions than answers about the argument. What do you mean by society? What kind of love? What kind of imagery? All poems use "diction," so what are you really trying to pinpoint?

One suggestion for working on your essay's outline/draft

1. Write your draft thesis statement on the top of your page. Then break your thesis into its natural “parts,” thinking about the overall structure of the essay.
2. Ask yourself, "What is it that I'm going to argue in the first paragraph?" Then, draft a sentence that expresses that argument.
3. Now choose the best, most effective quotation(s) to express your point. Every paragraph of a literary critical essay should refer directly to the text at least once. This does not mean reproducing large chunks of the text every time but moving between longer quotes, sentences, or simply phrases. **For every two sentences of prose or 2-3 lines of poetry you must have at least one sentence of analysis.**

3. When you're working with textual evidence, you will need to:

Introduce the quotation (*locate it or begin analysis*)

Reproduce the quotation in your own sentence either in its entirety or in select sentences, phrases, or lines. Depending on the length of the quote, you may need to offset the quotation. If you do this, you omit the quotation marks. See the MLA guidelines.

Explain the significance of your quotation. Ask yourself: "What does this detail suggest?" and "How does this relate to the claim in my topic sentence?" and then answer those questions in your analysis of the quote.

Paragraph Structure and Argument

Each sentence should be linked (in terms of argument) to the ones that precede it and follow it.

Eventually revise for continuity of argument and effective transitions between sentences and between paragraphs.

In a critical essay 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."

MLA Documentation

- Best to own the most recent edition of the *MLA Handbook*, which is currently in its Eighth Edition (2016). They do have [a MLA Style Center](#).
- However, the [Purdue Owl website](#) can answer many questions, although not all.

Quotations

Citing textual evidence is crucial to proving an argument in a literary essay, in terms of both primary and secondary sources

It is very tempting to believe that the quotations can do all of the work in a critical essay.

In order to avoid this particular temptation, you should set yourself a general rule: **for every two sentences of prose or 2-3 lines of poetry you must have at least one sentence of analysis.**

Never end a paragraph with an unanalyzed quotes.

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

Longer Quotations: Make sure that if your quote is offset from the paragraph in which it appears. See MLA guidelines for margins and tab settings.

- Usually you'll use a colon to introduce a quote in this way, but you may sometimes need a different type of grammatical notation.
- No quotation marks around the passage. If you have quoted speech within the passage, use double quotation marks.
- The period comes after the final sentence quoted and not after the parenthetical citation.

In both cases, you need 3 pieces of information 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.

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

Useful Purdue Owl Links

Overview and Workshop:

<https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/675/1/>

Works Cited Sample Page:

<https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/747/12/>

Sample Paper:

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

Formatting

All essays should be double-spaced; 12-point Times New Roman

The following information should be on the top left hand of the essay:

[Name]

Dr. Eberle

English 4460

[Date of submission]

Format your required Works Cited page according to MLA guidelines. Don't forget to include primary texts in your list of sources. <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/747/06/>

When uploading an essay make sure that you still have the proper MLA formatting (i.e. double-spaced, centered, hanging indents, etc.).

How to cite an excerpt in English 4460

Astell, Mary. From *The Spleen: A Pindaric Poem*. Course packet. *The Broadview Anthology of British Literature*, edited by Joseph Black, Leonard Conolly, et. al, Broadview Press, pp. 2-4.

Language

Use Active Language. 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."

En-Title the Essay

A title should entice your reader into reading the essay by suggesting content and argument. It should also note the author(s) and (ideally) the title(s) of the work(s) you will be discussing. Rules of grammar still apply!

The restorative role of letters in *Pride and Prejudice*: agents of revelation and reconciliation between characters

Jane Austen's Fathers: an examination of the father/daughter relationships in *Pride and Prejudice*, *Emma*, and *Persuasion*

Family in three of Jane Austen's novels: a blessing or a curse?

Some things to remember

Avoid "sweeping generalizations": “*Pride and Prejudice* is a very thought-provoking novel that deals with Jane Austen’s attitudes toward love.” or “Throughout time writers have questioned the power of education.”

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.

Avoid slang and linguistic constructions

Vary Sentence Length

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

Be concise! Remember you have page limit restrictions.

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."

Indicate titles of books (including books of poetry,) novels, plays, book-length non-fiction, long poems, \and movies with **italics**: (i.e. *The Spleen*, *Evelina*, *De Montfort*).

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

Always Proofread Your Paper *after* you have used spell check.

Construct a "**Works Cited**" page if you have consulted any outside materials or if you've used editions not assigned for the class.