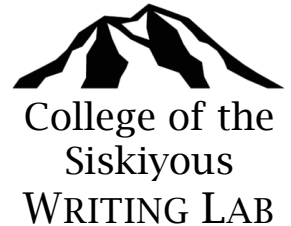


WRITING ABOUT LITERATURE



INTRODUCTION: Literature essays are arguments intended to persuade the reader that the ideas presented are valid ways of interpreting the text. They require a thesis, an overall claim supported by specific claims about the meaning, aesthetic value, and/or craft of a work. Claims are supported by evidence from the text, facts, reasoning, theories, and specialized knowledge.

Purpose: Literature essays produce interpretive readings of the text. Since good literature is complex and communicates on many levels, it lends itself to multiple approaches and many kinds of specialized knowledge:

Formal	Philosophical	Structuralist	Multicultural
Marxist	Cultural	Deconstructive	Sociological
Gender	Psychological	Post-colonial	Medical
Historical	Reader-response	Anthropological	Ecocritical
Feminist	Biographical	Mythological	Comparative

Audience: Imagine a general audience of intelligent readers who have read or are able to read the work in question and want a better understanding of it. Because your readers have access to the text, you will only need to summarize those parts that contribute directly to the line of reasoning in your argument.

Essay Titles: Titles for essays about literature generally make a reference to the main idea of the essay and the work it examines, for instance:

Shadows in O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night*
Intangible Harm: Science and Risk in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*

Active reading: To write about literature, you must read actively. You may find it helpful to keep a reader's journal, annotate the text, make marginal notes, and ask questions as you read along, such as:

- Does the author repeat images or ideas that contribute to the overall effect?
- What motivates the characters? Who is the protagonist? The antagonist?
- How are the actions of the plot structured? What is the source of conflict?
- How does the setting contribute to the overall effect?
- Did you find a theme? Is it stated directly or implied?
- Does the author use special devices or figures of speech?
- How does the work compare to other works? Are there allusions to other works?
- How would you describe the tone, diction or style?
- Is there one or more narrators? How does each affect the story? Do you trust the narrator(s)?

Prewriting: Before any formal writing begins, take time to brainstorm, free-write, cluster, map, outline, and re-read the text. Your goal is to select a topic and narrow it down in order to formulate a preliminary thesis, so you will want to experiment with different ideas until you find one that will work.

Drafting: Begin by writing a **discovery draft**; like a journal entry, this is a rough, rambling draft in which you discuss the topic and turn it over in your mind, noting page numbers where you will find evidence in the text. Once you are sure you have a focused claim and enough material, you can begin your **rough draft**. This is a full draft of the paper that focuses on the main argument and the evidence to support it.

Critiquing and Peer Review: Many instructors include a peer review as part of their in-class work. You may also want to take advantage of the excellent specialists in the Writing Lab. While you need to keep an open mind as you listen to readers' comments, remember: You need to take responsibility for your paper and make all final decisions about revision.

Introduction and Thesis: Like any other essay, your introduction needs to grab the reader's attention. Avoid vague and deadening statements, such as: "Throughout history, jealousy has played an important role in relationships." Instead, try one of the following:

- Ask a question that you intend to answer.
- Use a brief example or anecdote to launch your topic.
- Choose a quotation that pertains to your topic.

Always include an **introductory phrase**, giving full names for both author(s) and title(s) you plan to discuss. Your **thesis** statement concludes your introduction and should clearly state the claim you intend to support.

Body Paragraphs: Body paragraphs should make a single main point that supports your thesis, be well-developed with supporting evidence, and should flow easily from idea to idea:

- Don't let your paragraphs drift. Use a topic sentence that identifies your main point—what the paragraph demonstrates and proves.
- Always include evidence from the text(s) as support; the text is your main source of data.
- You may also include appropriate history, biography, theory, specialized knowledge, and comments from other critics or the author's other writings to demonstrate your point. Include a citation for each work.
- Use transitional words and sentences that show how the main point in your new paragraph is related to the main point in the preceding paragraph and how it relates to the overall thesis.

Conclusion: Your conclusion needs to do more than restate your argument. Your essay should lead the reader to a new understanding of the text. The best conclusions extend the insights of the main idea and examine the implications of the argument. For instance, a paper that focuses on the impact of the ghost in *Hamlet* might conclude by pointing to other hidden forces in the play.

- Don't restate the thesis and main points mechanically.
- Don't use phrases like "in conclusion" or "to sum up."
- Don't make sweeping claims that can't possibly be proven.
- Don't end by saying the argument is "merely your opinion."

Final Draft: Edit carefully for grammar, mechanics, and punctuation. Your final draft must be formatted properly in MLA with in-text citations and a complete Works Cited. Check with your Writing Lab or OWL to be sure you are using the most current edition of the *MLA Style Manual and Guide*.