Writing About Literature

Purpose: To exercise critical reading, thinking and writing skills in the study of literature. Through a close reading and critical analysis, we enhance our understanding and appreciation of literature, as well as the art of writing well. These same skills apply to reading all texts, including non-fiction essays and articles, scientific studies, and academic texts in general.

General Approach: Just as with non-literary texts, when reading literature for the purpose of writing about it, a three-part process must be followed: reading, interpreting, and writing. Each of these general steps require several smaller steps to result in a thoughtful, well written essay.

Reading a work of literature that you plan to write about involves multiple readings. The first reading should be an act of enjoyment and exploration -- read with an open mind to discover what the text has to say, and how it says it. Be open to surprises and unexpected twists. Do not take extensive notes; at most, make brief marginal notes or signs, such as checks or question marks.

Once you have finished this first reading, ponder what you have just read. Think about the ideas underlying the words and the story, the events described, and the use of language. Write a brief summary and your reactions as a reader.

Re-read the work. This time, annotate the text, write more extensive notes, and jot down questions you have. Often, the questions that arise may lead to interesting topics. If the work is long, summarize each chapter. If short, paraphrase the whole work. When coming across previous brief notes or symbols you wrote during the first reading, question what impressed you during the first reading. First impressions are often best for leading to something striking or insightful about the text.

Interpreting the text is a way of thinking about what you have read in order to fully understand it. What is the obvious as well as the underlying meaning? How has the author effectively conveyed this? When thinking about the text, take lots of notes since the act of writing produces the most fruitful thinking. Posing questions in relation to what you have read will lead to interpreting and critically analyzing the text. (See lists of questions following.) To arrive at a topic that will result in a well constructed analytical essay about the work, you must first interpret and analyze the text to gain a full understanding of what the text is saying and how it is said.

Writing begins with identifying a topic. When writing about literature, the topic generally relates to some aspect of the work, such as theme, use of language, symbolism, characterization, etc. Re-read your notes and identify which aspect of the work interests you most. Your notes may reveal an element of the text that is referred to multiple times, such as an implied message (theme) through imagery, or the way a character is revealed (characterization). Identify a possible topic, and then through further idea development
explore whether you are interested in writing more extensively about it. At this point, it may be helpful to return to the text to do yet another close reading of select passages that exemplify something about the topic. This may deepen your thinking about the it as well as reveal more clearly how the text illustrates a particular aspect of the topic.

You then must narrow your focus to a particular, or specific, aspect of your chosen topic. Your purpose is to reveal something new, even insightful, about a particular aspect of the text. Avoid reviewing the work, summarizing the story extensively, and focusing on how you felt as you read the work. Your task is to reveal something unique that you have discovered to help your reader understand better how the text works.

To help you become more specifically focused, pose a question that when answered will lead you to a draft thesis:

**Example from “Temporary Light”:**

**Question:** Why is the setting, i.e. weather and physical location, described so often?

**Thesis:**

- Incomplete: The setting in “Temporary Light” changes throughout the story.

- Complete: The various setting changes throughout “Temporary Light” are crucial to our understanding of what Suzanne goes through in struggling with her alcoholism.

A complete thesis indicates how or why the particular aspect, i.e. setting, contributes to the story on a broader level, i.e. plot and character development. If the thesis is incomplete, you will be led to simply describe an element of the text, which does not demonstrate in-depth analysis. Also, you are posing your observation of a particular aspect that must be proved. You must persuade your reader that your thesis is reasonable and logical by supporting your view with examples from the text.

A well constructed thesis will direct you to the supporting ideas and examples needed to develop, explain, and ultimately prove your thesis. Your supporting ideas must be clearly demonstrated by referring to and quoting the strongest, most convincing passages in the text.

**Example:** The setting in “Temporary Light” often reflects the interior state of the protagonist, Suzanne Cooper. The story opens with the protagonist driving through Beverly Hills in December, observing the Christmas decorations: “simulated snow . . . and legions of slaughtered pines.” Her observations refer to the artificiality and even threatening nature of the world around her. “It is as if the earth had suddenly divested itself of the ordinary and revealed its pagan interior. . . . This is a landscape of dangerous wounds and corrupted vegetation” (40). The protagonist’s view of this garish, holiday setting reveals her sense that the world lacks spirituality, and even seems sinister and threatening. This view conveys her psychological state and allows the reader to experience her fragility.
Two paragraphs later, we learn she is an alcoholic, which explains her precarious mental condition.

Roughly outline your essay starting with the thesis and followed by the supporting ideas and any examples from the text. In writing your initial draft, you may either begin your essay draft by focusing only on your own ideas, and then searching the text for the best supporting passages and/or scenes to interpret and integrate into your essay. Or, you can start by identifying those scenes and passages that are most striking and convincing, and then bring them into your draft as you write your ideas and interpret the scene or passage. In either case, keep in mind the “1-2-3 Rule,” state and explain your supporting idea--provide an example from the text--interpret the example and explain how it supports your idea.

Essay Structure:

Introduction:
Try to begin with something interesting to “hook” your reader. Briefly introduce story by title and author; “preview” some of the major points to be covered; and, state thesis.

Body Paragraphs:
Several supporting ideas should be stated, explained and fully developed. Each supporting idea should be fully developed in a paragraph and provide a slightly different perspective that relates to your thesis, and therefore develops and expands upon the main idea stated in the thesis. To support the ideas stated in your body paragraphs, provide quotations and/or scenes that illustrate your interpretation.

Conclusion:
Provide a synthesis of your supporting ideas that connects them as a whole to the thesis and proves that your unique observation of a particular aspect of the text is valid. As with all conclusions, it should also provide the reader with a satisfying sense of closure.

Using Quotations:

Quotations can often be the strongest support you can provide. If the author has clearly demonstrated in the text exactly what you are stating, then provide it as the best means of illustrating your point. But using quoted text must be done judiciously, so follow these guidelines:

1. Avoid lengthy quotations. Quotations of four or fewer lines of prose or three or fewer lines of poetry are most effective. Carefully and seamlessly introduce and integrate them into the text of your essay, and punctuate them correctly. (See example referring to “Temporary Light” above.)
For brief poetry quotations, use a slash to indicate a break between lines. Example:
In Flanner’s poem, “Noon on Alameda Street,” several images contribute to the sense that in this urban landscape, death is present. Even the sun “has a look / Of loaded radiance that might explode.” And “men and women” are “riding in their graves / With hands upon a wheel they cannot keep / Clear in the rapt confusion of the crowd.”

If a lengthy quotation is absolutely necessary, include no more than one or two in your essay. Any quotation exceeding four lines of prose and more than three lines of poetry, must be set off from the text of your essay. These longer quotations must be indented ten spaces at the left margin and be double-spaced.

Examples:
She is smoking a cigarette in the living room of her apartment in Santa Monica. The storms have stopped. The morning is brilliant with the kind of purified light often seen in high altitudes, a light which implies the revelatory, absolution and forgiveness. . . . There are ports where rivers empty their caravans of temporary light. (54)

Only to fury lifted of all horns
Mourning to themselves a thing to come,
For we have heard delirium in a claxon,
Seen revelation lit on chromium. (Lines 5-8)

2. Any change by you to the author’s original wording and/or punctuation of original text must be indicated appropriately. If any words are left out, the omission must be indicated with ellipses, or three spaced periods. (See prose example above.)

Ellipses can also be used within a single line of poetry. However, if one or more lines are omitted, a single line of spaced periods is inserted to indicate the omission:

Only to fury lifted of all horns
 . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
For we have heard delirium in a claxon,
Seen revelation lit on chromium. (Lines 5, 7-8)

If any words or letters are added or changed, indicate with brackets. For instance, to integrate a quotation into your sentence, you might change the verb tense. Examples: The poet indicates that city drivers “[see] revelation lit on chromium” (line 8). Or, “She [Suzanne Cooper] is smoking a cigarette in the living room of her apartment in Santa Monica” (54).

3. Punctuate correctly. Commas and periods must go inside quotation marks, even if the comma or period does not appear in the original quotation. All other punctuation marks, such as question marks go outside of the quotation marks unless they are part of the original quoted text.
4. References to the text, according to the Modern Language Association (MLA) guidelines, are provided in parentheses outside of the quotation but before the end punctuation, i.e. period or question mark. If quoting a longer passage set off from the text of your essay, the page or line reference in parentheses comes after the end punctuation. (See above examples.)

If you are referring to only one text that is listed on an attached Work Cited page, only the number of the page(s), or lines if a poem, where the text appears is required.

**General Tips:**

1. Use standard college essay format: typed, double-spaced on 8 ½ X 11” paper with one inch margins on all sides. First page should include heading with name, date, course title, and the title of your essay centered two spaces above first line of essay. The second and subsequent pages should be numbered with your last name on upper right hand corner. Staple all pages together.

2. Use MLA guidelines for citing the source of text quoted and/or referred to. **Be sure to attach a Work Cited page, or space down towards bottom of last page to provide it.**

3. When referring to what occurs in the text, use present tense.

4. Make sure your interpretation of the text is supported by the facts and does not overlook any conflicting major aspects of the work.

5. Ensure that you integrate quotations and references into your text so it remains seamless, i.e. grammar and syntax are correct.

6. **Do not overly generalize.** Stick to a close reading of the text; the best evidence to support your interpretation and opinion is the author’s own words.

7. **Avoid** reviewing the work, summarizing extensively instead of analyzing the text, simply describing some aspect, such as the plot, characters or setting, and focusing too much on how you felt reading the text.

8. **Remember,** your reader is looking for your unique critical analysis of the text. Strive for a fresh, original, insightful perspective on a particular aspect. And, stay focused on it.