

GUIDELINES TO WRITING ESSAYS ABOUT LITERATURE

FORMAT

The following suggestions are based on the latest edition of *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*.

1. Submit the essay in 8 ½-by-11-inch paper; double-space. Leave a one-inch margin all around. Keep a copy, but hand in the original.
2. Staple the pages of your paper; do not use covers or binders.
3. Put your name in the upper right hand corner of the first page; also put your name in the upper right corner of each page followed by the page number. Title page is not necessary.
5. Last-minute revisions may be made neatly on the final copy using a black-ink pen.
4. The first paragraph must contain the name of the work being discussed and the full name of the author.
6. Indent the first word of each paragraph five spaces (one inch) from the left margin.

MECHANICS

1. Diction:

Write using the third person only.

Use formal, standard English. Do not use slang or contractions.

Do not confuse the author with the speaker or the characters.

The views and interpretations you offer are yours, so avoid phrases such as “It seems to me” or “In my opinion.”

2. Title

Center the title of your essay about two inches from the top of the first page. Begin the essay two inches below the title.

Rule for capitalizing titles: capitalize the first letter of the first and last words of your title, the first word after a semicolon or colon, and the first letter of all other words except articles, conjunctions, and prepositions:

Celestial Images in *Macbeth*

or capitalize every letter in the title:

CELESTIAL IMAGES IN *MACBETH*

Your title is neither italicized nor enclosed in quotation marks (unless it includes material that would normally be italicized or in quotation).

3. ***Use of Quotation Marks/Italics:*** Use quotation marks around titles of short works, titles of chapters in books, stories, essays, short poems, songs, lectures, and speeches. Italicize titles of pamphlets and of books, that is, novels, periodicals, collections of essays, and long poems, such as *The Canterbury Tales* and *Paradise Lost*. (Underline only if you are typing on a typewriter; otherwise, italicize.)

DOCUMENTATION

The Works Cited page at the end of your essay should list the primary source(s) and all secondary sources consulted, whether quoted or not. The *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* is the official source for formatting documentation.

Notes providing the information on the source of the quotation should be inbedded in the text using the appropriate format illustrated below. The page or line number appears within parenthesis followed by the punctuation mark, usually a period. Content notes should appear at the bottom of the page.

Quoting from Plays

When you quote from plays, you give the act, scene, and line number (when provided) in the text (e.g.,

II,iv,264 or II.iv.264). If the edition does not number the lines, then provide as much information as you can (e.g., IV, p. 200).

Citation in the text:

In a moment of anguish, Lear cries, "O reason not the need!" (II. iv. 264).

Works Cited page:

Shakespeare, William. *King Lear*. In *The Norton Shakespeare*. Eds. Stephen Greenblatt et al. New York: Norton, 1997. 535-706.

Quoting from Poems

In the text give the line number(s) of the text you have quoted. If the poem is divided into cantos or other divisions, also provide that information. The page numbers at the end of the citation in the Works Cited page will guide the reader to the appropriate pages in the text.

Citation in the text:

The speaker gives examples of the horror of war: "But someone still was yelling out and stumbling / And floundering like a man in fire or lime" (l.5).

Works Cited page:

Owen, Wilfred. "Dulce et Decorum Est." In *Modern Poems: A Norton Anthology*. Eds. Richard

Ellmann and Robert O'Clair. New York: Norton, 1989. 312-313.

Quoting from Prose Works

Quoting prose is the most problematic because the pagination depends of the specific edition. To assist the reader, provide the book and chapter number (if available) in addition to the page number. You need to ensure that the bibliographic information is as accurate as possible. If quoting from a text different from the one used in class, consult your professor.

Citation in the text:

Gulliver's saying "the Thing which was not" was not understood by the master Houyhnhnm (IV,v, p.193).

Works Cited page:

Swift, Jonathan. *Gulliver's Travels*. In *Gulliver's Travels and Other Writings*. Ed. Louis A. Landa. Riverside Editions. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1960. 1-239.

Richardson, Samuel. *Pamela*. Ed. William Sale, Jr. New York: Norton, 1958.

Electronic Texts

Provide whatever information is available from the website (i.e., line number, page number, chapter number). If the text is part of a scholarly project or information database, use the following format for the Works Cited page:

Dryden, John. *An Essay of Dramatic Poesie*. University of Toronto English Library. Ed. Ian Lancashire. 1668. University of Toronto English Department. 1996.
<http://www.library.utoronto.ca/utel/rp/criticism/of_dr_il.html>

THE USE OF QUOTATIONS

Quotations from the material you are writing about are indispensable. They give your reader the material you are responding to and are the evidence that support your statements. But quote sparingly and briefly. Remember, the reader has read the text and now wants to read your prose.

Create a context for the quotation by introducing it to the reader so that your reader understands why you find the quotation relevant. Don't count on the quotation to make your point for you. You should introduce a quotation with your own words to suggest the significance of the quotation and the material.

UNACCEPTABLE: "He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning" (1.5).

This example just presents the quotation without any context, leaving the reader to guess at the significance of the quotation.

BETTER: The speaker describes a friend of his, whose lungs are filled with deadly gas: "He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning" (1.5).

This example introduces the quotation; the colon separates the writer's words from the text being

quoted.

BEST: The dying soldier is “choking, drowning” as “he plunges” toward the speaker, who is figuratively scarred by the gas (1.5).

This example shows the most skillful manner in which to present evidence: blending your words with phrases from the text. When you weave your words with the material from your sources, you strengthen your argument because you make it seem as though you and the source are at one.

The Mechanics of the Using Quotations

1. Long quotations (usually three or more lines of verse, five or more lines of prose): Double space before, after, and throughout the quotation, and indent. Avoid using, and, instead, reduce material either by summarizing or by cutting.

2. You need to make sure that you clearly identify the text you are quoting if using more than one text:

- a) if it is clear which of the works is being quoted, just give the page number (p. 95)
- b) if it is not clear, then give the author’s last name and the page number (Fielding, p. 95)
- c) if you are discussing 2 works by the same author, then give a short title in addition to the last name and the page number (*Much Ado* I. v. 95).

3. Identify the speaker of the quotation, so that the reader understands who is speaking.

4. When quoting verse within the text, use a slash (diagonal line) to indicate the end of a line of verse other than the last line quoted:

Alexas, though not a complete man, still knows about romantic love as he plans to use jealousy to rekindle Antony’s love for Cleopatra: “jealousy is like / A polished glass held to the lips when life’s in doubt” (IV, p. 155).

The slash is, of course, not used if the poetry is set off, indented, and printed as verse.

5. An embedded quotation (that is, a quotation that forms part of your own sentence) must fit grammatically into the sentence of which it is a part. For example, suppose you want to use Claudius’ line “I like him not” (III.iii.1).

Incorrect:

While speaking about Hamlet, Claudius says that he “like him not” (III.iii.1).

Correct:

While speaking about Hamlet’s behavior, Claudius says that he likes “him not” (III.iii.1).

or

While speaking about Hamlet’s behavior, Claudius says, “I like him not” (III.iii.1).

6. The quotation must be exact. Any material that you add must be in square brackets [] not parentheses. If you wish to omit material from within a quotation, use ellipsis (three spaced

periods). The following example is based on a quotation from the sentences immediately above this one:

The manual says that “if you . . . omit material from within a quotation, [you must] indicate the ellipsis.”

Ellipsis at the beginning or end of the quotation are not necessary.

7. Commas and periods go inside the quotation marks; semicolons and colons go outside. Question marks, exclamation points, and dashes go inside if they are part of the quotation, outside if they are your own.

8. Use single quotation marks (') for material contained within a quotation that itself is within quotation marks.

WRITING A LITERARY ANALYSIS ESSAY

A literary analysis essay seeks to elucidate the work by examining an aspect of it. One cannot analyze the whole work at the same time; one must examine a part of the work and, through that analysis, make a meaningful statement about the work as a whole. Your assignment is to discuss an aspect of one of the works in the appropriate section of the syllabus that has not been thoroughly discussed in class, i.e., do not repeat what has been said in class.

A literary analysis is not a retelling of the plot (plot summary), vague statements about liking or not liking aspects of the work, or biography of the author. It is the forceful presentation of appropriate evidence in support of the thesis.

Unlike a classroom discussion or ordinary conversation, an essay must stick to a specific point and develop it thoroughly; it must be concise and highly organized. The literary analysis will teach the reader about an aspect of the work the reader was not familiar with.

Before embarking upon any writing, one must first ask oneself who is one's audience? In a literary analysis essay, the audience can generally be considered someone who has read the work and is, thus, familiar with it, but has not specific knowledge of the topic being written about.

Students who have not written a literary analysis essay should consult with me as they start planning their first essay to ensure that they understand the nature of this type of assignment.

ACADEMIC HONESTY

Honesty requires that you acknowledge your indebtedness for material when

- 1) you quote directly from a work
- 2) you paraphrase or summarize someone's words (the words you paraphrase or

summarize are your own, but the ideas are not)

3) you appropriate an idea that is not common knowledge.

For example, you are writing an essay on the abrupt ending of *Tristram Shandy*. You read Wayne Booth's essay "Did Sterne Complete *Tristram Shandy*?" and want to use information for the following excerpt:

There is no indication whatever of any further possibility for the story, no play upon expectations of the kind to be found in all the conclusions of the other instalments. What is more, in the entire last instalment there are absolutely none of the promises that fill the rest of the book. If Sterne intended to write further volumes, it seems rather curious that, having shown through eight volumes his knowledge of how to titillate his readers' curiosity, he should suddenly lose that knowledge or decide not to apply it.

Wayne Booth, "Did Sterne Complete *Tristram Shandy*?" *Modern Philology* 48 (February 1951), 172-83.

You may use that information in one of the following ways.

1. Quote directly from the source:

Wayne Booth presents the argument that what Sterne does in the eighth volume is different from what he does in the other seven: "What is more, in the entire last instalment there are absolutely none of the promises that fill the rest of the book" (175).

2. Paraphrase or summarize the argument. You must acknowledge the source because the argument is not yours, it is someone else's: Unlike in the other volumes, in the eighth volume, Sterne does not make any promises as he had previously done (Booth, 175).

3. If you do the above without acknowledging your source, then you are guilty of plagiarism: Unlike in the other volumes, in the eighth volume, Sterne does not make any promises of events to come.

Failure to document properly the secondary sources that you use in your essay will mean an F in the course. Additional information on academic honesty may be found in the *Student Handbook*.

GRADING YOUR ESSAYS

What is expected of your essays? Several things. First, the essay should have no mechanical errors, i.e., errors in punctuation, documentation, and grammar. The sentences should be skillfully constructed so that they are forceful and effectively varied. Then, the essay should be well organized. Paragraphs should be coherent, unified, and well developed; the transitions between ideas and paragraphs, smooth. The introduction should catch the reader's attention and give necessary background information; it ought to have a thesis that is specific and significant. Most important, however, is the content of the essay. You should be examining an aspect of the work that merits analysis. How original your insight is will in large part determine your grade.

Be sure that you support your assertions with an adequate amount of evidence from the text.

Below is a description of expectations for the essays, divided into 3 categories (roughly corresponding to A, C, and F).

SUPERIOR

Content: The essay contains a significant central idea that is clearly defined and provides new insight into the work; it is supported with concrete, substantial, and consistently relevant detail.

Organization: Theme is planned so that it progresses by clearly ordered and necessary stages and developed with originality and consistent attention to appropriate proportion and emphasis; paragraphs are coherent, unified, and effectively developed; transitions between paragraphs are explicit and effective.

Mechanics: Clarity and effectiveness of expression are promoted by consistent use of standard punctuation and spelling.

Sentence structure/diction: Sentences are skillfully constructed (unified, coherent, forceful, effectively varied). Word choice is distinctive, fresh, precise and economical.

AVERAGE

Content: Central idea is apparent but trivial, trite, or too general or insignificant; it is supported with concrete detail that is occasionally repetitious, irrelevant, or sketchy.

Organization: Plan and method of theme are apparent but not consistently fulfilled; they are developed with only occasional disproportion or inappropriate emphasis; paragraphs are unified, coherent, and usually effective in their development; transitions between paragraphs are clear but abrupt, mechanical, or monotonous.

Mechanics: Clarity and effectiveness of expression are weakened by occasional deviations from standard grammar, punctuation, and spelling.

Sentence structure/diction: Sentences are correctly constructed but lacking distinction and are not appropriate, clear, or concise.

UNACCEPTABLE

Content: Central idea is lacking, confused, or unsupported with concrete and relevant detail.

Organization: Plan and purpose of theme are not apparent or are undeveloped or developed with irrelevance, redundancy, or inconsistency; paragraphs incoherent, not unified, or undeveloped; transitions between paragraphs are unclear or ineffective.

Mechanics: Communication is obscured by frequent deviations from standard grammar, punctuation, and spelling.

Sentence structure/diction: Sentences are incoherent, fused, incomplete, monotonous.

CORRECTION SYMBOLS

Casines

ag/pr agreement/pr—lack of agreement between pronoun and referent

ag/v agreement/sv—lack of agreement between subject and verb

avoid avoid using the underlined words or phrases

awk awkward—rewrite using more idiomatic English

cap capital—capitalize underlined word

c case—wrong pronoun case

coh coherence—a smoother transition needed, too much of a jump in the trend of thought

cont contraction—avoid using contractions

dm dangling modifier—word being modified is missing

d diction—select a word that is exact, idiomatic, and fresh

d/p diction/pompous—language too stilted and artificially formal

d/sl diction/slang—do not use slang or colloquial words in formal writing

d/sp diction/specific—word is too vague or general; use a more specific word

d/tr diction/trite—do not use trite expressions or words

d/w diction/wrong word—the word chosen says something other than what the writer means

frag fragment—incomplete group of words

mm misplaced modifiers—adjectives or adjective phrase should be placed as close as possible to the word modified

no cap do not capitalize—underlined word should be in lower case

non sequita does not follow—faculty logic, sentence does not follow assertions of preceding sentence (s)

no num no number—spell out the number

A paragraph—begin a new paragraph

pu passive voice—change the sentence to the active voice

pu point of view—avoid using “you” or “I”; use the 3rd person

ref reference—ambiguous or incorrect referent

rewrite rewrite/recast—sentence does not make any sense; rewrite it

ro run on—incorrect joining of 2 independent clauses

sp spelling—misspelled word

sub subordination—subordinate the sentences marked

t tense—incorrect tense used

trans transition—need to provide a smooth transition between the 2 sentences or paragraphs

unq unnecessary question—avoid using questions

var variety—change the sentence patterns

w wordiness--eliminate some words

yuk yuk—I hate it; use another word

/ unnecessary punctuation—eliminate it

// parallelism—lack of parallel structure

^ punctuation mark should be inserted