

Writing about Literature

Like all university essays, the English paper requires critical thought and strong argumentation, but its focus on language and close textual analysis makes it unique. Here are some tips that you'll want to keep in mind when writing about literature.

Avoid plot summary. The main purpose of an English paper is to advance an argument. As a general rule, mention only plot details that are relevant to your argument. You may occasionally need to contribute a small amount of additional information about the storyline to make your analysis coherent, but keep the summary to a minimum, and leave plenty of space for your own ideas. You can usually assume that your reader knows the narrative well.

Master the art of the analytical thesis. A good thesis is a statement of roughly one to three sentences that says something intelligent about a literary work. It is not sufficient simply to identify a theme in your thesis. For instance, saying that a text deals with the theme of love or death or betrayal is not enough. (Instead, though, you might consider the ways in which love or death or betrayal come to be understood within the text.) A thesis must be complex enough that it would not be immediately obvious to a casual reader, but it must be simple enough that it can be stated in a relatively short amount of space.

Here is a list of possible questions around which you might construct a solid thesis: How does the author's or narrator's perspective on a given theme shift as the text develops? Are there any apparent tensions or contradictions within the text? If so, how might they be resolved? How does the text engage with the major political or cultural ideas of the era in which it was written? How does the text challenge or undermine the dominant conventions of the genre in which it was written? These are just a few suggestions. There are thousands of ways to craft a thesis, so don't feel limited to the questions above. Here are two examples of effective thesis statements:

By incorporating novelistic techniques—such as sustained imagery and character development—into a non-novelistic work, Alice Munro, in her short story collection *Who Do You Think You Are?*, subverts the narrative conventions of novelistic discourse.

Yeats's "Easter, 1916" appears both to condemn and to celebrate the revolutionary impulse in early-twentieth-century Ireland. It is neither a nationalist rallying cry nor an anti-nationalist cautionary tale. Rather it conveys profound ambivalence toward the Easter uprising.

Let the structure of your argument determine the structure of your paper. In most cases, you will best serve your argument by deviating from the chronology of events in the text you are critiquing. It is fully acceptable to pluck pertinent evidence from the beginning, middle, and end of a literary text and to use these disparate examples in the same paragraph. Sometimes you may be asked to provide a close reading of a given literary work. Often a close reading is structured the same way as any other English paper: you present a thesis and then defend it through detailed analysis of the text. But occasionally, your professor might ask you to do a line-by-line or paragraph-by-paragraph reading of a poem, passage, or story. This is one of those rare instances in which a more sequential approach is appropriate.

Opt for analysis instead of evaluative judgments. When writing a paper, focus on analyzing the work, not celebrating it. Instead of telling your reader that a given work is beautiful, lyrical, or timeless, focus on the ideas the text conveys and the ways it goes about conveying them. You may come across a line in a poem or novel that is so beautiful, or so sloppy, that you cannot resist commenting on it. If you're burning up to make an evaluative point, then do so. But keep it short and sweet (or short and snarky), and don't let it become the focus of your paragraph.

Don't confuse the author with the speaker. Often, particularly when you are analyzing a poem, it is tempting to assume that the author is also the narrator. This is usually not the case.

Poetry, like the novel or short story, is a creative genre in which authors are free to inhabit the voice(s) of any character(s) they like. Most poems do not identify a narrator by name, but the fact that the speaker is unnamed does not necessarily imply that he or she stands in for the author. Remember, the person doing the writing is the writer, and the person doing the speaking is the speaker. In some cases, you may choose to treat the speaker as a stand-in for the writer. In these instances, make sure you have a reason for doing so—and consider mentioning that reason somewhere in your paper.

Pay attention to both content and technique. *Content* refers to plot: to the chronological sequence of events in a literary work. *Technique* refers to the various other ways in which the work creates meaning—for example, through grammar, syntax, imagery, metaphor, genre, and even extra-textual features like typesetting or illustrations. When quoting a text, consider both how the passage advances the plot and how it manipulates language to create meaning. Whatever helps you to make your argument is fair game, but strong essays will engage with both content and technique. Consider the following example:

In the opening to Ezra Pound's short poem "A Pact," the speaker addresses the nineteenth-century American poet Walt Whitman, Pound's literary predecessor:

I make a pact with you, Walt Whitman—
I have detested you long enough.
I come to you as a grown child
Who has had a pig-headed father;
I am old enough now to make friends. (1-5)

Here, the speaker seeks to make amends with Whitman, whose poetry he once detested. Although the passage conveys a desire for reconciliation, it does not do so in an amicable manner. The writing is portioned out into short, terse statements, with little concession to diplomatic language. Consequently, the passage reads more like a pledge or vow than a peace offering. Moreover, Pound's verse is inflected with familial language. The speaker refers to himself as a "grown child" who is finally "old enough now to make friends," whereas he positions Whitman as the "pig-headed father." Clearly, the speaker is motivated not by a genuine need for conciliation but by a begrudging sense of familial duty toward a father whom he never respected.

Integrate quotations fully into your argument. Whenever you incorporate a literary quotation into your writing, you must justify its usage. First, be sure to contextualize the quotation by giving some information about it (who is speaking, what part of the text it comes from, etc.). Then, follow each quotation with a few sentences in which you unpack the passage and relate it back to your argument. In other words, a quotation should never speak for itself: you must do the necessary work to demonstrate what the quotation means in the context of your argument. The following passage offers an argumentative close reading of a quotation from Keats:

In the opening of "To Autumn," Keats depicts the harvest period as a "Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness / Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun" (1-2). Here, the speaker juxtaposes images of seasonal abundance with notions of loss connected to the impending winter. The word "fruitfulness" has obvious associations with agricultural productivity; however, it is modified by the adjective "mellow," which limits the reader's conception of unbridled abundance. Moreover, Keats's phrase "the maturing sun" sets associations with warmth and comfort against notions of old age and declining prowess.