

#29) Literature: Reviewing, Writing, & Revising

Why?

Why write about literature? A writing assignment that involves reading and considering a work of literature will not only develop your reading, thinking, and writing skills but will also connect you more deeply to the piece than simply discussing it in class and taking a quiz. Additionally, learning to write analytically about literature enhances performance in other areas of study. The following are some guidelines for the process of writing about literature.

Step One: Reading Effectively

- Read the work actively, pencil in hand. When reading a novel, a long poem, or long play, make notes in the margins or on note cards that point to interesting, important, or confusing parts of the text. For a shorter work, like a story, a poem, or a short play, read once without marking, then go back and make notes during your second reading.
- After reading and making initial notes, write a brief summary noting the main characters, conflict, and the message or main point you perceive in the work. This summary could be as short as a sentence or two or as long as a few paragraphs.
- Look back over the notes you made and read your summary. If you had to discuss this work with others, what would be the main point you'd want to discuss? Or, what would be the one question you'd like to have answered about the text? Write the answer to one of these questions (or both).

Step Two: Planning

- Read your assignment. Your instructor might have offered some *cue words* like "analyze," "compare and contrast," etc. He or she may have also provided *key words* which direct you toward specific topics like characters, images, tone, point of view, etc. Underline or highlight all these cue and key words. If you don't understand some of them, ask your instructor or a tutor. Here are some quick definitions of common literary terms:
 1. analyze: separate elements from the whole in order to examine them more closely and discover something about the whole.
 2. compare and contrast: discuss the similarities and differences between two or more things.
 3. criticize: present your opinion of the good and bad aspects of a work.
 4. discuss: consider multiple elements of a topic or work (usually involves interpreting, criticizing, and illustrating).
 5. illustrate: give examples of something.
 6. interpret: give the meaning of something.
 7. characterization: the qualities connected with a character in a work, such as physical appearance, personality, attitude, etc.
 8. theme: a main idea presented in a work (be careful; a "theme" is not the same as a "moral").
 9. imagery: concrete objects in a work (such as the moon, a sword, shadows, sounds, etc.).
 10. motif: a recurring image, concept, or structure in a work that relates to the theme.
 11. tone: the attitude conveyed by a narrator, character, or speaker.

12. structure/form: the writing format in which the idea is presented—not just the primary form, like poem, short story, or novel, but every decision the author makes in converting an idea into language. For example, the stanzaic pattern, rhyme scheme, and repetition in a poem would be part of its form. The point of view and chronological order would be part of the structure of a work of fiction.
- Look over the notes you made about the text. If you’ve discussed the work in class, your instructor will likely have used some of the key words while lecturing, so find those words in your class notes.
 - Here are some typical areas addressed in papers about literature:
 1. Discuss the characters in a work: How do they help present the overall meaning of the work? Do they represent stereotypes, or are they allegorical (symbolic of an idea)? Are they based on historical figures? Can you compare and contrast characters to reveal something important about the message?
 2. Analyze how an element is used by the author to express a message—for example, how a poem’s repetitions or tone amplify the speaker’s feeling of urgency about the subject.
 3. Compare and contrast elements (characters, themes, images, etc.) from two or more works.
 4. Discuss the social, historical, and political context of a work and the ways those elements are represented in the text (like gender roles in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*).
 5. Interpret and/or analyze a work based on an outside philosophy or specific perspective (like Marxism or feminism).
 - After you’ve narrowed your focus to a single topic, come up with a “**working thesis**”—that is, a statement of argument about the topic that you will attempt to support in your paper. It should be considered a “working” thesis at this point because you may find that you need to modify your thesis as you progress through your research and drafting of your argument.
 - When devising a thesis, remember that you should try to assert something debatable—something *not* obvious, something that can be argued and is interesting. For instance, stating that “Aeneas displays heroic characteristics in *The Aeneid*” as your thesis won’t work because the statement is rather obvious—it’s a windy way of saying that Aeneas is the hero of *The Aeneid*. However, asserting that “Aeneas’s heroic characteristics differ from the traditional heroic characteristics because he is modeled after Octavian Augustus” would be a better thesis because it argues something that needs to be supported by evidence—and it’s more interesting: you’d have to first prove that Aeneas’s characteristics are different from traditional heroic characteristics, then provide evidence that these unique characteristics are based on Octavian Augustus.
 - After you have narrowed your focus and devised a working thesis, look back through your notes on the text and mark the ideas and sections of the text that relate to your thesis. Your assignment might require you to do some outside research. If so, now would be a good time to gather supporting information from other scholars. See the section on researching below.
 - You might transfer the relevant notes, and even particular quotes, to note cards or a new document on your computer.
 - Add any new observations or ideas to your note cards or document—either elaborating on the notes you already have or creating new notes. Set aside your notes and make a brief outline of the major points you intend to make.
 - Organize the note cards (or arrange the notes in your computer document) according to the major points in your outline. Sort the multiple notes in each section from most important or interesting to least.

- Now you can make a more detailed outline including the subtopics and/or supporting points from your notes.

Step Three: Researching

- One challenge with conducting research is deciding where to start. Waiting until you've developed a working thesis will help you focus your research. You can use key words and phrases to search for relevant information in databases and search engines. For instance, if your working thesis were the example provided above, you would search for information about the heroic characteristics of Octavian Augustus and Aeneas.
- The Internet is probably the best place to start. Type a good keyword phrase, like "Octavian Augustus and The Aeneid," into Google. You'll be able to find some preliminary sources and general information about your topic.
- Although the Internet is a good place to start, it *should not* be your primary source for supporting evidence. Many online documents will be brief and useful only for summary information and bibliographies. And not all Internet sources are accurate and reliable. You should supplement Internet sources with more traditional scholarly articles and books—so be sure to take a trip to your library.
- At the library, use the same key words to find articles and books on your topic. If you have trouble finding helpful sources, ask librarians—they're paid to help you find what you're looking for, and they can help refine your catalog and database search phrases and keywords. Photocopying is useful at this point because you won't be able to remove some periodicals from the library, and you'll often only need a chapter out of a book. Remember to record all the appropriate publication information for the sources you use.
- Organize everything before you head to the stacks. Make a list of what you need (alphanumeric library codes, publications, authors, pages, publication dates), and alphabetize that list by alphanumeric library code. Skim each text for usefulness right there among the shelves so that you don't end up dragging a lot of useless material around. Take care to find and copy material in sections rather than all at once.
- Remember that most university libraries have online databases that also include online texts of journal articles. These are especially helpful because you can quickly search through articles to find and print the best and most relevant.
- Don't get overwhelmed by the amount of information other people may have written about your topic. Keep your thesis in mind, and underline, highlight, and make notes in the margins or on note cards of only the statements that have to do with your main idea.
- You won't use all of the sources you've found in your research. Pick out the statements and ideas that are the most interesting and the most illustrative of your own ideas.
- Remember that this is *your* paper and that *your* thoughts should take center stage while the secondary sources you find should play supportive roles, adding credibility and support to your argument.
- Be sure to use the **primary source**—that is, the work of literature you're writing about—for examples that illustrate your ideas, and then refer to the **secondary (researched) sources** to support your points.
- Incorporate the outside sources into your writing by summarizing, paraphrasing, and quoting important ideas. (See QWC handout #4 for help on quoting sources.)
- Don't forget to cite your sources appropriately. Keep track of the bibliographical information for all your sources. Your teacher will most likely require that you follow the MLA format for citing sources. Use your textbook or a good writer's handbook for the guidelines (or consult the QWC's

MLA handout). If you compile your bibliography or Works Cited page as you work, you'll save yourself a great deal of time.

Step Four: Writing

- Doing all of the pre-writing activities such as devising a thesis, outlining, and organizing your notes according to your outline will make your writing process much easier.
- Make sure you have developed clearly defined main points or subtopics around which you'll organize your argument. Consider the best order in which to present them. Because you are constructing an argument, you'll need to arrange your evidence in a way that persuades your reader. Some writers start with their strongest point and end with their weakest while others take an opposite approach.
- When drafting your paper, try skipping the introduction and beginning with one of your subtopics. Later, you'll be able to go back and draft an introduction that more accurately and effectively introduces your paper. You'll also be able to write a thesis more clearly supported by your body paragraphs.
- When developing your subtopics, remember to 1) **assert** your point, 2) **support** your point with evidence and examples, 3) **explain** your examples and reasoning, 4) and **connect** your point to your **thesis**. Repeat this process throughout the body paragraphs.
- Remember to keep your argumentation balanced: balance your own arguments and reasoning with evidence; balance your use of outside sources with your use of the primary source; and balance your subtopics so that one doesn't seem to be much more or less developed than the other subtopics.
- Write an introduction that engages your reader and introduces your topic. Write a conclusion that recaps your topic and closes the discussion.

Step Five: Reviewing and Rewriting

- Reviewing and rewriting is just as important as writing your paper. What good will all your work be if your audience is distracted by disorganization, unclear wording, faulty grammar, and punctuation errors? It's best to take some time between writing and revising so that your mind is fresh when looking over your paper. (See the QWC's revising checklist—handout #9.)
- Refer to MLA guidelines for documenting your sources and formatting your paper—you don't want to lose points for technical mistakes.

These are helpful suggestions, we hope, for approaching a writing assignment about literature, but remember that each writer is different and routines vary. Remember that the Quality Writing Center is here to assist you during any part of your writing process—from the time you get your assignment to after you have made several drafts. Good luck!

Sources Consulted:

The Norton Introduction to Literature, Shorter Third Edition by Carl E. Bain, Jerome Beaty, and J. Paul Hunter.

The Online Writing Lab at Purdue: <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/>