Writing About Literature

WHAT IS THE MOST IMPORTANT THING TO REMEMBER WHEN WRITING ABOUT LITERATURE?

A paper about literature is not a summary; you should not merely say what happened in the story. This type of essay is an argumentative essay in which you try to convince your audience that your interpretation of a text is valid.

HOW DO I PREPARE TO WRITE A GOOD PAPER ABOUT A WORK OF LITERATURE?

1. Read critically and analyze the text. When writing about literature, it is very important to read the text carefully. You should read the text at least twice and react to it as you read. Find the meaning beneath the surface of what you are reading. Look for patterns and repetition in the text. If you are having problems thinking about underlying meanings, read the questions at the end of the selection. These questions will usually get you thinking on the right track. Next, skim back through the story and find quotes that you may want to use.

2. Form an arguable yet tentative thesis that makes an assertion. Remember, a good thesis statement doesn't state the obvious. Stating the obvious usually leads to plot summary, which you want to avoid. A good way to test a thesis is to ask yourself, "Could I argue the opposite?" For more help in forming an arguable thesis, go to: https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/588/01/.

SOME TIPS FOR WRITING ABOUT LITERATURE

1. Introduce your subject early on. Because your paper deals with literature, you should identify the author and the work you will be discussing early in the paper, preferably in the first or second sentence.

   **EX:** In the play *Hamlet*, by William Shakespeare, Hamlet's existential doubt causes his downfall as the tragic hero.

2. Italicize the titles of novels or plays, and enclose the titles of short stories and poems in quotation marks.

   **EX:** The short story "Hills Like White Elephants"
   **EX:** The novel *The Sun Also Rises*
   **EX:** The play *Hamlet*

3. Use an active voice (versus a passive one.)

   **INCORRECT:** Hamlet is watched closely by the guards.
   **CORRECT:** The guards watch Hamlet closely.
4. Do not use 2nd person. Some professors may find using "I" (1st person) acceptable. Using the pronoun "you" (2nd person) is rarely acceptable when writing about literature.

**INCORRECT**: You can see the irony in Hamlet's soliloquy.
**CORRECT**: The irony in Hamlet's soliloquy is apparent.

5. Use the present tense. Even though a story might have been written a long time ago, use present tense verbs when writing a literature paper.

**INCORRECT**: After she learned her brother was dead, Ophelia began to descend into madness.
**CORRECT**: After learning of her brother's death, Ophelia begins to descend into madness.

**Exceptions**: If you are discussing something outside of the work itself (the author, historical background, etc.), it is acceptable to use past tense.

**EX**: Hamlet was first published around 1660.

6. Avoid simply summarizing the plot. You should assume your readers have read the work you are discussing. Therefore, it is not necessary for you to tell your readers what they already know. It is your job to interpret the text instead.

**INCORRECT**: Hamlet sees his father's ghost in Act I.
**CORRECT**: After seeing his father's ghost in Act I, Hamlet begins to doubt himself for the first time. This doubt marks the beginning of his downfall as the tragic hero.

7. Use solid evidence to back up your thesis. This evidence should include quotes and paraphrases. However, it is not enough to simply quote and paraphrase. You must interpret what each quote or idea means in relation to your thesis.

**INCORRECT**: Hamlet says, "To be, or not to be, that is the question" (3.4.56).
**CORRECT**: When Hamlet says, "To be or not to be, that is the question," he is questioning his right to exist (3.4.56).

8. Avoid plagiarizing. If you use information from an outside source, always cite it, even if it is a theory or idea. A good rule of thumb to avoid plagiarism is this: If you are unsure if something should be cited, cite it.

**INCORRECT**: Some critics argue that Hamlet is in love with his mother.
**CORRECT**: Some critics argue that Hamlet is in love with his mother (Smith 11-14).

9. Reread your thesis to decide if it supports the main ideas of inquiry. If not, feel confident that changes are appropriate.