

## **Writing About Literature** UWF Writing Lab

Essays about literature are written works that take up the intellectual challenges posed by literature. They raise and try to answer fascinating and challenging questions: How does the work reflect its time? How does it reflect the author's life and thought? What does it mean? What are its techniques? Is it good art? Has it had an impact on society? What human problems does it portray? What implications does it have for our own time? But you will write better essays if you recognize another quality of essays about literature: They are almost always arguments. An *argument* is an essay that has three main qualities. It persuades an audience of the validity of your ideas. It uses facts, reasoning, and sometimes testimony (the commentary of people other than yourself) to explain and support your ideas. And it has a *thesis*, one overall point that ties together all of the specific claims in the essay.

- from *Writing Essays About Literature* 3rd edition  
by Kelly Griffith, Jr.

Before you begin a literary analysis, become familiar with major literary elements, such as theme, imagery, symbolism, and point of view. Also consider the individual elements that apply to the type of work you are analyzing. In fiction you would consider plot, character, and dialogue, while in poetry you need to know about meter, rhyme scheme, figurative language, and other poetic elements.

- from *English: Composition and Grammar* fifth course  
by John E. Warriner

Be sure to allow yourself plenty of time. Writing an essay about a work of literature can be a lengthy task, and you should allow plenty of time for revision.

Just as you would prepare a lab project for a science fair, before writing an essay about literature, you must first form a hypothesis. Read the story very carefully, perhaps two or three times, and take notes. From your reading or your notes, try to isolate a theme or question that strikes your interest. Also consider topics discussed in class as possible starting points for an essay. Try to apply your other outside interests to the work you are considering. If you are still having trouble finding a suitable topic, talk to your professor.

The thesis will tell what the paper will focus on or try to prove. The thesis statement should be specific, limited in scope, and only one sentence in length. You must form an opinion about the work, an opinion that could be argued one way or the other. The thesis must have two arguable sides; that is, someone could conceivably argue against your paper.

After you've decided on a thesis, you should have your professor look it over. He or she might be able to point out trouble spots that lie ahead or may be able to help you further narrow your topic. Once your professor has approved your thesis, congratulate yourself. Finding a topic can be the hardest step in writing an essay.

Now that you have chosen a topic, you must argue for your hypothesis using logic and specific support from the text.

“Reread or look back over the work, closely examining the plot, theme, imagery, rhyme scheme, and other literary elements. Search for and write down all ideas, quotations, and details that relate to specific aspects of your topic. Keep collecting information until you have enough to develop your topic thoroughly.”

- from *English: Composition and Grammar* fifth course  
by John E. Warriner

After you’ve worked out a thorough outline, it’s time to begin fleshing out the text of your final essay. Be sure to include your thesis statement in your introduction. Make sure every paragraph has a topic that directly supports your thesis. Pay attention to transitions between paragraphs; your ideas should develop logically from one to another. It is important that you use specific details and quotations from the text to support your argument.

“Be sure to place quotation marks before and after all word for word quotations taken from the work. If you quote two successive lines of poetry, place a slash (/) where one line ends and the next begins.”

- from *English: Composition and Grammar* fifth course  
by John E. Warriner

Here are some more important rules to follow:

Use the present tense.

Avoid excessive plot summary.

Don’t use more than 15% direct quotations.

Avoid first or second person pronouns (“I,” “me,” or “you”).

Exclude details that do not relate directly to your thesis.

Use the rules of documentation required by your professor.

Plagiarism is Illegal.

Plagiarism is the unacknowledged, or insufficiently acknowledged, use of another’s ideas and/or his expression. This definition applies equally to
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undocumented borrowing from books and articles, from notes taken in other classes, or from the work of other students. Whenever an idea and/or phrase is not the result of the student's own primary research and thinking, its source must be properly identified in a footnote or parenthetical reference; otherwise plagiarism results. Plagiarism combines theft with fraud, and the penalty is correspondingly severe: failure for the assignment and, in most cases, for the entire course. At his or her discretion, the instructor may recommend that the student be suspended from the University.

Now is the time for revision. In addition to correcting your grammar, spelling, and punctuation, you should also smooth your transitions and check your logic. In the course of writing your paper, you may discover something about the work that you had not previously considered. You could add this idea into your paper during your revision, or you could rewrite the paper entirely using this idea as your thesis. Don't be afraid to revise multiple times.

When you have argued your thesis and supported your argument to your satisfaction, it is time to conclude your paper. Your conclusion should present a summary of the literary analysis and also offer a further understanding or implication of the thesis. Be careful, however, not to introduce any new ideas or facts that you have not addressed in the body of your paper.

Once you have a draft you are happy with, ask a professor or a friend whose opinion you trust to read over your paper for you. They will surely find mistakes you have missed and points that need further clarification.