

## Writing Tips for Essays on Literature

- 1) Don't begin your paper with a vague generalization. Don't begin your paper with an observation about the way things have always been ("Throughout the history of English literature . . ."). Don't write anything that could apply just as easily to another paper.
- 2) Start with a specific, concrete detail about the piece of literature that you are writing about. Plunge into one of the key observations you have made, that you want to communicate, about the text at hand.
- 3) Your paper will need an argument. An argument is not a topic. It is something you want to communicate about the text, a related series of insights that ANALYZE the text. You might make an argument about the historical significance of a text, or its formal nature, for example. Build your argument out of specific pieces of evidence, and generalizations about the importance of those details.

Some arguments are better than others. "Othello is scared of sex" is not a good argument because it is not analytical: it does not ask WHY Othello is scared of sex in (for example) historical, cultural, formal, theoretical, psychological, or philosophical terms. "Othello is scared of sex because he is the product of a culture that is anxious about female sexuality" is a better argument because it ANALYZES and INTERPRETS your observations.

- 4) Your paper will need an introduction that gives a sense of its argument – an indication of where you are going and why. This usually takes the form of a thesis statement. You will need to come back to the first paragraph after you have written the whole paper, and revise it so that it reflects your overall argument.
- 5) Your argument should progress in a series of organized STAGES. These stages will connect: they will progress logically from each other, and they will add up. MAKE your argument. CREATE it so that it has a beginning, middle, and end. Make sure to DEVELOP your argument – use each analytical insights you establish to take you to an even subtler and more interesting analytical insight. You will need a through-line in your paper, one that connects all of your points in a sequence.
- 6) Before you write, and while you are writing, go through the entire text, taking notes, identifying each relevant detail, and thinking carefully about how these details fit into a sequence in your argument. Make sure to identify each point in the text that relates to your topic, and think about how you want to craft an argument out of what you notice. You will need to read and reread the text carefully as you write.
- 7) Your greatest asset along the way is how you deal with textual evidence. You must use quotes to support your claims. Each time you quote from the text, think carefully, subtly, and rigorously about what is at stake in every part of the quote. Quoted evidence will guide you through your paper – you will notice contradictions to your thinking and you will have to revise what you have

claimed earlier. You should allow quotes to lead you to the next STAGE of your argument, and revise what has come before. Allow yourself to be guided by what you see in the text – don't impose your argument on the text unjustifiably!

8) Write more than one draft! It helps to read your writing out loud. Your argument will change as you write the paper. You will notice lots of things you hadn't seen before. If your argument is exactly what you thought it would be when you started, you are not being sufficiently thoughtful about the text you are analyzing. So go back and make sure everything fits into place. Writing is an act of discovery. Don't be afraid to change your words and your argument – you should expect to delete about twice as much as you keep.

9) Aim for a style that is clear and direct. Don't try to sound overly "academic," and don't use a word if you aren't sure what it means. Don't show off: this tends to hurt your grade. You want to express complex and subtle ideas without convoluting your own style, and this is very difficult.

### **Finally, a few important technicalities:**

The title of a short poem or short story should be put in quotation marks. If a title is descriptive, it does not need quotation marks. The title of a very long poem or a novel is italicized or underlined (underlining indicates italics). Examples: "Ode to a Nightingale," Sonnet 129, *Paradise Lost* or Paradise Lost.

You need a title for your paper. Your title should hint at – or express directly – your paper's argument. (examples: not "Keats's Sonnet to Sleep" but "Sleep, the Embalmer" or "The Poet Begs for Release" or "Sonnet Insomnia")

When speaking of words *as* words, put them in quotation marks. (example: "The word 'embalmer' is a strange choice for the poet to make, since an embalmer preserves a dead body by injecting chemicals into the corpse.")

In American English, punctuation generally goes INSIDE quotation marks. (example: "Keats inserted a stanza beginning 'In after time a sage of mickle lore,' which describes the giant's revenge, in Book V of the *Faerie Queene*." But: "Keats inserted a stanza beginning 'In after time a sage of mickle lore'; it comes in Book V and describes the giant's revenge.")

Write out contractions.

Write with one-inch margins and a 12 point Times New Roman font. Do not use formatting tricks to make your paper longer.

Make sure to quote ACCURATELY and PRECISELY. Cite all quotes in MLA format.

Always use MLA specifications. When in doubt, consult the MLA Style Book, or visit the following website: <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/section/2/11/>