**Strategies for Writing an Essay**

When writing literary essays you must:

**Interact with the literature**

* think carefully about what you have read
* engage in critical response as you discuss the literature in relation to the given topic
* suspend judgment and read the work on its own terms
* look for patterns and purpose

**Analyze the literature**

* examine ideas, themes and symbols
* examine characters and their motivations, choices, causes and effects
* go beyond the literal level to discuss the figurative level

**Avoid giving a plot summary**

Assume the person reading your essay has already read the selection. What the reader is interested in are:

* Do you understand what you have read? Can you distinguish between the literal and the figurative levels of meaning?
* Can you perceive what is important about the work even if it is not directly stated? That is, can you read between the lines to determine the theme?
* Can you respond to the selection in a mature, reasonable, thoughtful and sensitive way?
* Can you appreciate the technique and style of the work?

**Be specific**

* Specific examples are needed to show that you know how to back up and interpretation or opinion and you have read the text, and know it well. Avoid being too general with your examples.

**Be accurate**

* Be very clear with that you want to say. Your writing should be straightforward. Avoid flowery attempts to impress the reader with language you are not comfortable using.
* Your facts have to be accurate. Every time you mention a character or plot event, this information cannot be false – otherwise you have committed a basic error. Referring to a character by a wrong name or misspelling a character’s name are inexcusable factual errors.

**Use relevant literary terms**

Using terms appropriately will help to communicate your understanding of the literature, and show that you have mastered literary terms and related concepts.

-If you are writing an essay about character, use character related terms such as:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Protagonist | The main character in a work |
| epiphany | A moment of intense realization for the protagonist |
| foil | A character who is contrasted with the protagonist |
| goal | The protagonist’s objective |
| irony | Deliberate contrast between apparent and intended meaning, or an unexpected outcome |
| motivation | The reason the character does what he or she does |

**Thesis Statements**

Before you begin creating an introduction, you must develop a controlling idea or thesis statement. The thesis introduces the central purpose of the essay and gives it direction. It is a universal statement about a topic and develops the body paragraph ideas. It should be expressed as a single, clear statement. The basic parts of a thesis statement for a **literary essay** include:

1. the title of the work studied (optional if mentioned earlier in the introduction)
2. the name of the author/playwright
3. the genre
4. the given topic
5. the focus/controlling idea (ex. what the essay writer will prove regarding the given topic)

The general structure of the thesis statement is as follows: (Please note that this is not a rigid rule, but intended only as a guide for students.)

**Thesis: In the \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, the author \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ explores**

**(genre) (title) (author’s name)**

**the idea that \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.**

**(topic & student’s focus/controlling idea(s))**

**Ex. In the novel, The Giver, the author Lois Lowry explores the idea that one must make significant life-altering choices to overcome dilemmas.**

Students should keep in mind that the thesis statement is the primary building block for the entire essay. Time should be taken BEFORE any writing is done to construct a thesis and establish a focus for the essay. This thesis may need to be revised once the essay is complete.

Other hints for building a thesis:

* Try to limit the length of a thesis statement. Keep it short and simple.
* Make the main argument as direct and specific as possible.

DON’T – Friendship is nice.

DO - Friendship can be a pleasant and fulfilling aspect of life.

* Do NOT state the thesis as a question.
* Do NOT use the first person pronoun, or express the thesis as a personal opinion.
  + Avoid “I think, I believe, or In my opinion”
* Do NOT use complex or wordy language. Simplicity is often the best alternative.

**Writing the Introduction**

One of the functions of the introduction is to arouse interest, and the student has many creative alternatives for the initial general statement. Choices include:

1. Making a general observation on the theme in society

* ex: In society, people tend to place great emphasis on first impressions.

1. Begin by easing into a quotation (always identifythe speaker)

* ex: Fulton J. Sheen once said, “Pride is an admission of weakness.”

1. Start with a general misconception

* ex: For centuries, society has mistakenly classified ambition as virtue.

1. Begin with relevant concepts from other areas of study

* ex: Dalton’s “billiard ball atoms,” Columbus’ round earth and Copernicus’ heliocentric solar system were all ideas used to find explanations for unexplainable natural phenomena.

1. Start with an analogy – a comparison of two things where the familiar is compared to the unfamiliar

* ex: Finding a boyfriend is much like fishing. You need all of the proper equipment and the proper bait.

1. Begin by stating a fact and linking it to your idea

* ex: When Hitler turned anti-Semitism into an official government policy in 1934, within a decade nearly six million Jews, as well as gypsies, intellectuals, homosexuals, Marxists and other “enemies of the state” were murdered.

1. Start with an anecdote – a short, amusing narrative

* ex: An Australian newspaper reports that four youths in Canberra approached a speed-camera van, and while three of them engaged the operator in questions about how it worked, the fourth surreptitiously removed the van's number plate. The four then screwed the plate on to their own car and drove past the radar at high speed seventeen times, leading to seventeen automated speeding tickets arriving at the Department of Transport.

**Understanding the Conclusion**

-Restate thesis first, but avoid repeating yourself. For example, you might include the name of the author, but not the title. Always include the topic and focus discussed in the essay when you restate the thesis.

- Close off with general, but insightful, sentences that relate to the topic and thesis and that reveal a truth about the human condition.

- Connect ideas by referring to your essay title and/or to the quotation or the example in your introductory statements.

Essay Tips:

* have a creative title that links to the topic and the comments in the introduction and conclusion
* underline all book-length works of literature; use quotation marks for short texts; italicize film titles
* characters in the literature should not be discussed prior to the literature introduced in the thesis
* do not start the conclusion with “In conclusion…”
* do not discuss the character after the thesis is restated in the conclusion
* do end with insightful thoughts that relate to the human condition

**Writing the Essay Body Paragraph**

The number of paragraphs depends on how many arguments are required to develop the focus presented in the thesis statement. Generally an essay develops 2-4 ideas per body paragraphs.

Body Paragraphs Include:

1. a topic sentence that expresses the main focus of the paragraph as it relates to the thesis; it must include the given topic.
2. 2-4 ideas linked to the main argument presented in the topic sentence each with specific plot support including:

- specific plot incidents to support each idea (do not re-tell plot)

- quotations to support each idea or most ideas (integrate smoothly into your essay)

- an explanation for each idea/support

c) a closing sentence that restate the topic sentence

**Transitional Devices**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| To add ideas: | a second method, additionally, also, again, along with, and, another way, as well, besides, furthermore, in addition, likewise, moreover, next, second, similarly, third, together with, too |
| To show time: | about, a little later, after, afterward, as soon as, at first, at the end of, at the start of, before, during, finally, in those days, immediately, in the meantime, later in the day, meanwhile, next, next week, now prior to, then this year, today, tomorrow, until, when, while, yesterday |
| To show place: | above, across, against, along, alongside, amid, among, around, away from, behind, below, beneath, beside, between, beyond, by, down, father away, here, in front of, inside, in the distant, in the foreground, into, near, nearby, off, on, on the left, on the right, on top of, outside, over, overhead, there, throughout, under, underneath |
| To show order: | afterward, as a result, consequently, finally, first, for this reason, hence, in conclusion, in the second place, in short, in summary, last, next, second, therefore, to begin with, to conclude, to sum up |
| To contrast ideas: | although, as proposed, but, conversely, counter to, even so, however, in contrast, nevertheless, no doubt, on the contrary, on the other hand, otherwise, still, whereas, yet |
| To compare ideas: | again, also, and, in the same way, likewise, similarly |
| To show results: | accordingly, as a result, consequently, for this reason, generally, hence, specifically, therefore, thus, to clarify, to emphasize, to repeat, usually |
| To introduce illustrations: | as an example, consider as an illustration, for example, for instance, in effect, in other words, like, namely, specifically, such as, that is, to illustrate, to highlight |

**Integrating Quotations**

1. Short quotations (one sentence or less) should be integrated into sentences with minimum disruption to the flow of the essay. The quotation should be smoothly integrated with the text and should be commented on:

Romeo reveals his desire and impatience when he says, “O, wilt thou leave me so unsatisfied?” His haste will later lead to his sudden choice of suicide.

1. Avoid having two quotations in a row. If you have two, use your own commentary to bridge the two.

**Ineffective:** Richard Cory had everything going for him. “He was a gentleman from sole to crown.” “He was rich – yes richer than a king.”

**Effective:** Richard Cory had everything going for him. Not only was he a “gentleman from sole to crown,” but he was also “richer than a king.”

1. Longer quotations should be indented. For example, in an essay on Robert Frost’s “Stopping by woods on a Snowy Evening,” you might quote a stanza to focus a discussion on some aspect of the poem:

The last stanza suggests the seductiveness of the woods – of “dropping out” of human society:

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,

But I have promises to keep,

And miles to go before I sleep,

And miles to go before I sleep.

However, the poet is aware of the promises he has made – responsibilities and social obligations – which necessitate his leaving the woods.

1. Separate lines of poetry running within your sentences with a slash (/), and preserve the capitalization of words at the beginning of the line.

The speaker notes that the bruised heart of the mourner wonders “was it He that bore,/And Yesterday, or Centuries before?”

1. If for the clarity of sentence structure, you must alter a quotation, place the alteration in square brackets.

Goodman Brown claims that “with Heaven above and Faith below [he] will Yet stand firm against the devil.”

1. If you omit material in order to be concise, mark the omission with three periods, called ellipsis (…).

Monstresor states that when it comes to “painting and gemmary, Fortunato… was a quack.”

Note: Most quotations should not be longer than one line long. Do not overuse quotations as it becomes less your work and more the work of someone else.

**Integrating Quotations**

There are three ways to integrate quotations into your essay effectively. All of the methods for integrating quotations are correct, but you should avoid relying too much on just one method. You should instead use a variety of methods.

1. **Use an introductory or explanatory phrase, but not a complete sentence, separated from the quotation with a comma.**

* You should use a comma to separate your own words from the quotation when your introductory or explanatory phrase ends with a verb such as "says," "said," "thinks," "believes," "pondered," "recalls," "questions," and "asks" (and many more). You should also use a comma when you introduce a quotation with a phrase such as "According to Thoreau."

Examples:

* Thoreau suggests the consequences of making ourselves slaves to progress when he says, "We do not ride on the railroad; it rides upon us."
* Thoreau asks, "Why should we live with such hurry and waste of life?"

1. **Make the quotation a part of your own sentence without any punctuation between your own words and the words you are quoting.**

* Notice that the word "that" is used, and "that" replaces the comma which would be necessary without "that" in the sentence. You usually have a choice when you begin a sentence with a phrase such as "Thoreau says." You either can add a comma after "says" (Thoreau says, "quotation") or you can add the word "that" with no comma (Thoreau says that "quotation.")

Examples:

* Thoreau suggests the consequences of making ourselves slaves to progress when he says that "We do not ride on the railroad; it rides upon us."
* Thoreau argues that "shams and delusions are esteemed for soundest truths, while reality is fabulous."

1. **Use short quotations--only a few words--as part of your own sentence.**

Examples:

* Thoreau argues that people blindly accept "shams and delusions" as the "soundest truths," while regarding reality as "fabulous."
* Although Thoreau "drink[s] at" the stream of Time, he can "detect how shallow it is."

1. **Introduce a long quotation with a complete sentence and a colon.**

Example:

* The last stanza suggests the seductiveness of the woods – of “dropping out” of human society:

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,

But I have promises to keep,

And miles to go before I sleep.