



Essay Writing Notes

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This document contains brief notes on how to structure a typical undergraduate analytical literary essay. It is intended to supplement, but not replace, more detailed information given in class on effective essay writing and thesis crafting.

Writing About Literature

What Does It Involve?

Writing about literature in the form of a literary essay involves transcending a mere emotional response to a literary work, interpreting and critically analysing a literary work, reflecting on the larger meanings of a literary work, and communicating interpretations and critical analyses of a literary work persuasively. Writers should keep these factors in mind when writing essays.

Who Is It For?

Literary essays are for people who believe literature expresses important ideas they want to know more about, people who believe literature is complicated and want to learn about its various meanings, and people who are literate and have already read and thought about the work under consideration. Writers should always keep their audience in mind when writing essays.

Essays and Analytical Essays

What Is an Essay?

An essay is a type of expository writing. *Expository* means “serving to clarify, to set forth, or to explain in detail.” An essay requires a strong thesis statement, evidence supporting the thesis, and persuasive analysis of that thesis. There are three main types of essays: explication essays, analytical essays, and comparison and contrast essays. The information in this document applies mainly to analytical essays.

What Is an Analytical Essay?

The word *analysis* comes from the Greek *analyein*, meaning “to break up.” Thus, an analytical essay breaks up something into several components in order to understand the whole. It separates the literary work into various parts and then selects one part for close examination. Analytical essays are structured in such a way to facilitate this process of separation and examination. Writers should structure their essays carefully to render their analysis as clear, concise, and persuasive as possible.

introductory paragraph	attention-getting remark
	contextualizing information
	thesis statement
body paragraphs	topic sentence
	evidence
	analysis
concluding paragraph	thesis statement
	contextualizing information
	attention-getting remark

Essay Structure

Most analytical essays contain three components, each of which contains its own three components. The **introductory paragraph** (the first paragraph) and the **concluding paragraph** (the final paragraph) mirror each other and articulate the most important part of the essay: the thesis. The **body paragraphs** break down that thesis into its component parts for analysis.

Introductory Paragraph

1. Attention-Getting Remark

The attention-getting remark in the introductory paragraph is a statement that grabs the reader’s attention from the very beginning of the essay. It can be a critical opinion, a technical definition, a fact, or a quotation. It is not the thesis statement, but it should draw the reader in, make the reader interested in the topic, and prompt the reader to read further.

2. Contextualizing Information

The contextualizing information in the introductory paragraph is whatever information is required to contextualize the thesis, and to help it make sense to the reader. It should be just a few sentences of purely explicatory, factual information linking the attention-getting introductory remark to the thesis. It should

not include arguments or quotations (save this information for the body paragraphs).

3. Thesis Statement

The thesis statement in the introductory paragraph is a single sentence that clearly and concisely indicates the central argument of the essay. It is not the same thing as a topic: it must be argumentative, it must take a clear position on some significant issue, and it must answer the questions “Why?” and/or “How?” (and not just “What?”). It is characterized by all four of “the Four S’s”: significant, single, specific, and supportable.

Concluding Paragraph

1. Thesis Statement

The thesis statement in the concluding paragraph is a restatement of the thesis statement in the introductory paragraph, using different phraseology from that in the introduction. It provides an extra shade of meaning to the thesis, and it explains the thesis to the reader more comprehensively. It should not be a word-for-word replication of the thesis statement as articulated in the introductory paragraph, but it should convey the same argument.

2. Contextualizing Information

The contextualizing information in the concluding paragraph provides a review of the body paragraphs’ main points. It provides a final summary of the essay’s contents, and it highlights the totality of the essay’s central argument.

3. Attention-Getting Remark

The attention-getting remark in the concluding paragraph is a statement of closure that concludes the essay in a memorable way. It may include an assertion of value, a reference back to the introduction, a quotation, or a suggestion for a further avenue of study. It should not, however, introduce a brand new topic or an issue tangential to the essay’s central thesis.

Body Paragraphs

1. Topic Sentence

The topic sentence in a body paragraph is a succinct opening sentence that gives the main idea of the body paragraph. It is a kind of “mini thesis” for that paragraph only. It is directly related to the Essay’s main thesis, in that it can be a component of it, an aspect of it, or a sub-argument of it. It is sometimes referred to as a “claim,” since it makes an assertion about the work under consideration and not just an observation about it. It provides a clear, concise statement about something significant the paragraph is going to demonstrate about the work through evidence and analysis.

2. Evidence

The evidence in a body paragraph is substantiation of the topic sentence through illustrative quotations to back up the interpretation of the work articulated in the topic sentence: Quotations can be direct (verbatim, with quotation marks) or indirect (paraphrases, without quotation marks), long (block quotations) or short (integrated quotations). Essayists typically use a variety of different quotation types to help back up and contextualize their claims.

3. Analysis

The analysis in a body paragraph explains how the evidence supports the claim in the topic sentence. It develops the evidence and claim by expanding on their direct connection between each other. It is never plot summary: assume the reader is already familiar with the work under consideration, and focus instead on interpretation and analysis.

More on Thesis Statements

Central Argument

A good thesis statement is a single sentence that clearly and concisely indicates the central argument of the essay. A thesis statement can sometimes be two sentences in longer essays, but one sentence is usually sufficient for shorter essays. The thesis statement provides an answer to a question, articulates a solution to a problem, and/or makes a statement that takes a clear position on a debatable topic. It articulates the main argument of an essay, which the body of the essay will go on to dissect and defend in its sub-arguments.

Thesis Statements vs Topics

A thesis statement is not the same thing as an essay topic. Topics are discursive or descriptive, broad and general, and answer the question “What?”. Thesis statements, by contrast, are argumentative or debatable, narrow and concise, and answer the questions “Why?” and/or “How?”. A good thesis statement, in other words, must be argumentative; it must take a clear position on some significant issue rather than simply make an observation.

“The Four S’s”

A good thesis statement is characterized by all four of “the Four S’s”:

- **significant:** it should deal with an important problem or issue in the literary text(s)
- **single:** it should consider one issue only, rather than attempt to consider multiple issues
- **specific:** it should consider as narrow, concise, and specific an issue as possible, rather than attempt to consider a vague, open-ended, or generalized issue.
- **supportable:** it should be defensible through evidence from the literary text(s)

Thesis Statement Tests

Writers sometimes subject their thesis statements to these two “tests” to gauge their quality and effectiveness.

The “So What?” Test

If the thesis statement prompts the question, “So what?” from a theoretical reader, it is probably insufficiently argumentative. It may mean that the thesis statement has not taken an identifiable position on a salient issue in the literary text.

For example, the thesis statement “Margaret Atwood uses familiar settings in *The Handmaid’s Tale*” fails the “So What?” Test because it prompts the question, “So what?”. Why is it significant or revealing that Atwood uses familiar settings? How, exactly, do these settings contribute to the novel’s themes? A better thesis statement would answer these “Why?” and “How?” questions prompted by the “So What?” Test.

The Counterargument Test

If there is no apparent valid counterargument to the thesis statement, it is probably insufficiently argumentative. It may mean that the thesis statement is too descriptive, discursive, or factual, rather than truly argumentative or debatable.

For example, the thesis statement “Margaret Atwood uses familiar settings in *The Handmaid’s Tale*” fails the Counterargument Test because the counterargument—“Margaret Atwood uses unfamiliar settings in *The Handmaid’s Tale*”—is factually inaccurate. That Atwood uses familiar settings in her novel is patently obvious; the thesis statement describes something factually accurate about the novel rather than formulating an argument about it. A better thesis statement would take the factual statement as a given, and put forth an argument for how or why this observation is significant or revealing in the larger context of the novel’s themes or preoccupations.

For More Information

This document makes use of the following sources, which should be consulted for more detailed information.

The Purdue Online Writing Lab (<https://owl.purdue.edu/>)

- **Essay Writing:** General Writing > Academic Writing > Essay Writing
- **Argumentative Essays:** General Writing > Academic Writing > Essay Writing > Argumentative Essays
- **Paragraphs and Paragraphing:** General Writing > Academic Writing > Paragraphs and Paragraphing
- **Writing About Fiction:** Subject-Specific Writing > Writing in Literature > Writing About Fiction

Headrick, Paul. *A Method for Writing Essays About Literature*. 3rd ed., Nelson, 2017.

- **Chapter 1:** Audience and the Literary Analysis Essay
- **Chapter 2:** Analytical Paragraphs
- **Chapter 3:** Theme
- **Chapter 4:** Argument Structure

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