

Guide for Writing Papers

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Part One: General Comments

A. Assignment:

You are required to write an analytical essay, not an informal discussion of or a response to literature. Do not think of the assignment as a book or film review, i.e. an evaluation on the work's merits or defects, the author's "failures." An analytical essay presents an argument about how and why an author or playwright does certain things in his or her work; it examines the work's thematic, conceptual, or rhetorical infrastructure ("the basic, underlying framework or features of a system"). The general aim is to clarify an insight you have had and to communicate that insight persuasively to others. The specific aim is to formulate a thesis about an aspect of a work and develop it with reasoning and appropriate evidence. You cannot achieve these aims merely by reading x number of books and/or articles and summarizing them. In fact, doing so entails some potential risk: (1) being overwhelmed by secondary material; (2) losing contact with the text itself; (3) falling into plagiarism. At the same time, secondary material exists as a valuable resource, not only in helping to refine one's argument but in familiarizing the student with nature of professional scholarly discourse and argumentation. Keep in mind that should you consult secondary material, you must provide a "Works Cited" page at the end of the paper and indicate where you have used those citations in the body of your text. We offer the following comments to help you prepare your ideas and papers.

We expect you to write a formal analytical essay even if you have not done so before. If you have never written this kind of paper—and you should have throughout your ENC 1102 class—and if you have no experience reading literature analytically, we recommend that you look at Mortimer J. Adler and Charles Van Doren's *How to Read a Book*, an excellent book and not as simplistic as its title suggests. If you are an experienced analytical reader and if you would like to develop your skills by thinking about theoretical approaches to literary criticism, we recommend you look at *Critical Terms for Literary Study*. Finally, if you would like to increase your critical vocabulary, develop your understanding of terms that we mention in class, or familiarize yourself with literary genres and periods, look through *A Handbook to Literature* (if you are an English major, you should consider adding these last two titles to your personal library especially if you are considering graduate school).

B: The Introduction:

Your introductory paragraph should have three stages. Do not confuse these stages with the rote formula of the tripartite essay you wrote in freshman English classes. The process here

is far more sophisticated and complex. In the first stage you, introduce your subject—the literary work itself. In a few (2-4) sentences, present the author and title of the work along with a general overview of the work’s primary issues, outstanding themes, or general achievement. Keep in mind, however, in dealing with a major figure like Shakespeare, scholars rarely begin “In William Shakespeare’s play *Hamlet*” or “In William Shakespeare’s brilliant tragedy *Hamlet*” preferring instead “In *Hamlet*”; virtually no one in the English-speaking world needs telling that *Hamlet* is either a play, a tragedy by Shakespeare, or brilliant.

In the next stage of your introduction, present your topic—the interpretive issue that the paper will explore. In a sense, you want to show that a dimension of the work remains unclear unless one looks at it in a certain way, for example, by viewing it within its historical context. In the third stage, present your thesis (see below)—your answer to the implicit questions that you raise in stage two. We say implicit questions because of the need to avoid the temptation to participate in Jeopardy-esque criticism by phrasing your topic in the form of a question.

Avoid beginning the essay from the beginning of time; what the bible says, how a dictionary defines a word, or how tragedy/love/passion/greed/envy exist from time immemorial remains irrelevant as do your personal feelings on the work. Using Shakespeare once more as an example, providing a brief life history in no way advances an argument on how “the mousetrap” functions as prolepsis to the final staging in *Hamlet*. As a general rule, avoid commentary on twentieth century issues—*Othello* is just like the O. J. Simpson trial or no modern woman would stand for being treated like Katherine in *Shrew*—when writing on literature from previous centuries. At the same time, a recent *Shakespeare Quarterly* contained an article that drew on the “Stockholm syndrome” as an analog to Katherine’s situation.

To write an effective analytical essay, avoid fuzzy generalizations, cliches, hollow adjectives like “interesting” and “beautiful,” jargon, and reductive expressions. Terms you need will not come from the top of your head or from a gut response to the text; they more likely come from prolonged wrestling with the text and from a series of rough drafts. Critical writing calls for straightforward argument, not purple prose; aim for clarity, precision, economy of statement. Get to the point elegantly, directly, quickly. Strive to create formal academic discourse, not journalese; thus jokes, flippancy, slang, or off-color language remain inappropriate. The reader approaches your papers with academic respect; grant the reader and his or her discipline with similar respect. Keep in mind as well that your audience for an academic paper remains an informed reader, one thoroughly familiar with the work in question. Therefore, eschew plot summary unless you deal with a particularly obscure text.

C. The Thesis:

An argument demonstrates the justice, value, and logical coherence of a thesis. Remember that a thesis is different from a subject or topic. The subject is the literary work you are analyzing: e.g., *The Taming of the Shrew*; the topic the interpretative issue you are trying to address; the thesis the stand you take on that issue. A subject is what you are talking about; a topic is why you are talking about it; a thesis is what you are trying to say about that topic. A thesis is debatable; a topic is not—that no closure exists for the Sly frame in *the Shrew*, for example, is a fact—for a topic simply identifies (notes the existence of) grounds for debate or cause for confusion. A topic is something you can mention to a professor without feeling

nervous; a thesis keeps you up at night. To continue with *Shrew* as our example, contending that the play within—the Katherina-Petruchio plot—offers a conclusion to the Sly frame constitutes a thesis that needs proving.

The following is not a thesis: “Shakespeare uses imagery in *The Taming of the Shrew*.” What kind(s) of imagery—animal, commercial, religious—does he present? How does he use it? To what purpose? How does its use inform our reading/understanding of something in the text? The following is a thesis:

The open-ended nature of the Sly frame allows for a form of closure; rather than abandoning it, the play provides closure to *the Shrew*’s Induction by creating a parallel ending to *The Taming of a Shrew* with a change of name and place not unlike that which Sly has undergone. (Free 44)

True, this thesis is long; and, true, it makes the idea behind it sound more complicated than it actually is. Still, this scholar’s purpose is clear, and one can anticipate what she will argue in the rest of the essay and why. Note that because the above quotation is four lines long, it appears as a block quotation—meaning that we indent it ten spaces from the left, that we do not use quotation marks, and that we present the parenthetical citation after the period (two spaces) instead of before (as we would normally do). See **Part Two**, section D.

Do not fall into the trap of trying to tell your reader what authors believe (the intentional fallacy); we do not and cannot know. Instead, concentrate on what each writer’s work conveys, on the effect of his/her language, her/his characters, his/her imagery. Whenever tempted to assert something as being obvious or clear, consider alternative assertions that someone might make in arguing with you and provide a counter-argument. Remember that great art is not clear, objective argumentation. Literature fascinates us due to its endless ambiguity, its power to undercut itself, its ability to perform the paradoxical feat of exploring and affirming two opposed realities.

D. Conclusion:

When you have defended your thesis clearly and thoroughly, you need to conclude your essay. Avoid beginning the concluding paragraph with an artificial-sounding announcement like “To conclude . . .” or “In conclusion . . .” Similarly, repeating the introductory paragraph serves no purpose as the conclusion. Finally, making the final paragraph a summary of all that comes before provides no useful information. A well-written essay provides the reader with the argument you have presented throughout. Instead, rephrase your thesis in more subtle terms—ones that reflect the preceding analysis and that the reader would not have been prepared for prior to reading the essay’s body. Another possibility is to place your thesis in a broader context to leave your reader with food for thought about its larger implications for the interpretation of a particular work or for the understanding of a given passage. A combination of the two will also work.

Part Two: Evaluation

Remember that literary analysis represents a formal academic discipline. Your task, when you write your essay, calls for you to demonstrate your ability not only to present a persuasive analysis but also to present your analysis in the proper format. Evaluation of your performance falls into three basic areas of concern: structure, content, and presentation. Each category counts for approximately one-third of the grade for the paper—although, of course, poor performance in one category inevitably affects the success of the others. Consider carefully the following comments.

A. Structure:

Academic writing remains basic and straightforward, designed to facilitate quick readings of subtle arguments. Accordingly, the structure of the argument is extremely important. Each paragraph should present a unified block of thought, a clear and significant stage of your argument. Avoid paragraphs that are too long (in a short essay of seven to ten pages, page-long paragraphs are too long) or too short (one or two sentences cannot adequately develop a topic sentence). As a general rule, each paragraph should have a minimum of five or more sentences. However, one sentence coupled with five sentences of quoted material fails to constitute a satisfactory paragraph; in that case you would still have a one-sentence paragraph—the sentence introducing the paragraph. Paragraphs with fewer sentences than five indicate undeveloped or unsubstantiated thought. Nor should quotations end paragraphs; readers expect commentary to follow quoted passages.

Avoid use of the passive voice and copulative (to be) verbs: instead of “It is argued by A. C. Cawley that *Everyman*” say “A. C. Cawley argues that *Everyman*” Use strong verbs that show what you are saying; instead of saying “Lysander and Demetrius are arguing over who loves Hermia most,” change it to “Lysander and Demetrius argue” Further, eliminate expletives—This is, That is, There is/are. Instead of “There are several passages of animal imagery important to our understanding of marital relations in the Early Modern Period,” write “Several animal images clarify our understanding of marital relations in the Early Modern Period”—much stronger, tighter.

Individual paragraphs should be as well-focused and clearly defined as the paper as a whole. Each paragraph should build on what you present in the previous paragraph and prepare your reader for what you will do in the next paragraph. Arguments and examples that belong in one paragraph should not crop up earlier or later in a paragraph devoted to a different stage of the argument. If a reader can move your paragraphs around without disturbing the nature of the argument, then you have not paid sufficient attention to the structure of the argument. Following a work’s chronology often helps to avoid this problem. Using chronological order is not the only way to pursue a thesis, however, depending on the argument you are presenting. One might begin a study of *Romeo and Juliet*, for example, by examining Friar Lawrence’s soliloquy on the duality in nature at 2.3 and then argue how earlier moments in the play anticipate it and later ones prove it true. Yet here too we form a logical order to how we would approach the presentation of evidence for our argument. We would not bounce back and forth from earlier to later, later to earlier without causing confusion.

Our term for the structure of an academic essay is the “intellectual matrix” of the essay. The “intellectual matrix” comprises the thesis statement and the first sentence of each paragraph. Just as your thesis indicates clearly the argumentative purpose of the paper, so should the first sentence of each paragraph, the “topic sentence,” indicate the argumentative purpose of that paragraph. Indeed, a reader scanning the opening sentences of your paragraphs should be able to read only these sentences to determine the logical design of your argument. They should amount to a clear-cut outline of the paper. In other words, the reader should be able to summarize your argument from those sentences alone. The extent to which the “intellectual matrix” of the paper provides an accurate overview of your argument and your ability to construct a systematic, unified argument that builds from one state (one paragraph) to the next constitutes one-third of the grade.

B. Content:

Remember that your assignment is literary analysis—not plot summary, not simply historical commentary, not personal reactions/responses, not reviewing as would a film or drama critic. Your task asks that you show the connections between what an author or playwright says and how she or he says it—in other words, to identify and to examine the author’s literary strategies. Remember that your reader has read and thought about the literary work that forms the basis for your paper and, therefore, does not need or want a plot summary. While pointing out an overlooked or obscure moment in a work may call for clarification through brief summary, the entire plot does not. Grades for papers based primarily on plot summary or on general historical commentary will begin somewhere in the “D” range and will usually go down from there. Historical commentary is useful, often necessary in small doses, but use it wisely; make sure you know what you are talking about, e.g., why Shakespeare treats Joan of Arc so harshly in *I Henry VI*; and do not allow it to distract you from your main task—literary analysis. Develop your ideas and support them carefully.

Keep in mind that in the best papers students cite the text not as evidence or proof of a given assertion but rather as the object about which he or she will make assertions; a quotation is, in other words, subject matter to be analyzed and interpreted, not an example that proves something. Look at Marie Borroff’s use of quotation and analysis from the “Introduction” to her edition of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*:

Strangest of all, the overpowering vividness of [the Green Knight’s] presence, as communicated to us by the poet, gives him a kind of brute reality that seems to be lacking in the idealized knights he has come to challenge. When he explains his visit in terms of the “praise” he has heard of this assembly, and speaks of Camelot as the “house . . . / Whose fame is so fair in far realms and wide” (309-10), he seems to be referring not to actual deeds worthy of commendation but to stories that may or may not be true. (9)

Note the economy of quotation. Also note her use of “seems”; rather than saying that “obviously” the Green Knight hurls a sly insult to the assembly, Borroff infers the slur from the text. Doing so keeps her from the intentional fallacy. Further she avoids making the quotation reductive given her assertion of the Green Knight’s “brute reality” in the first sentence above in

contrast to Camelot's "fame . . . so fair in far realms . . ." (10). A final point here: the quotation sits framed within her sentence, not tacked on as an example.

Let your analysis of the text and the ideas that spring from that analysis determine the form of your paper. Avoid writing an essay that relies on the formulaic introduction, three examples and then a dull, repetitive conclusion. Students often fall into a formulaic morass by thinking if they say we find three types of imagery in XX, they then need merely to begin the body by giving examples of the first type, the second, the third. Several problems arise from such an approach. First, no thesis exists; that imagery exists remains a fact, not an argument. Second, the ensuing essay trundles from example to example in an overblown five-paragraph essay. We end up with paragraphs that read "In Act One we have our first example of Y imagery. Tom says Jane is a horse. Next, Phil calls Janis a cow" and on and on we go weeping for relief from yet another example of any kind of imagery. Instead, investigate with particular care passages or issues or images that are problematic for you, things you do not fully understand or cannot fully account for; make the writing process the means by which you come to a clearer understanding of your text and then convey that understanding to your reader. To do so think organically: first, choose a text or passage(s) that you find interesting; read and re-read carefully, many times, asking yourself questions about individual lines, phrases, and images thus working through to your conclusion.

You must present your argument carefully and methodically. In the early part of your paper, clearly present the interpretive problem (the thesis) you intend to solve and then proceed to solve it in stages. At each point of your paper, think about what your reader needs to know if he or she is to understand and accept what is coming up in the next stage of your paper. At each stage, use quotations from the text to show the basis for interpretation. Show your reader that you are analyzing the text and not just talking about it. Keep in mind, however, that over-quotation errs as much or as more than under-quotation. Quoting twenty-five to fifty lines in a short paper serves no purpose other than filling up space (see the Borroff passage above).

Focus remains the key to success. You cannot hope to analyze an entire play or novel in a short paper. Therefore, you must isolate a representative portion of the work: a character, a scene, a rhetorical or ideological pattern, a pattern of allusions/symbols/images, or some other aspect of the author's techniques and strategies that bring us to a new understanding of the work or passage(s) in question. Find something you can examine in detail and explain your interpretation carefully and fully, once again anticipating contradictory arguments (take the use of green as color, for example, in a text. You might argue that the use of green represents rot and putrefaction; green, however, may elsewhere represent spring and fruition. You might say, "Granted, green often represents the positive—spring, fruition—in X's work; given the wording and context in Y, however, suggests the opposite. Close examination reveals that Christine's use of it throughout provides a negative subtext to the plot's surface gaiety.") Justify your choice of thesis at the beginning of your essay; at the end of your essay, state how your conclusions enable readers to understand other aspects of the work. Content also constitutes one-third of the grade.

C. Presentation:

Your paper must meet grammatical and formal standards of academic prose. Leave yourself time to revise and revise with a grammar handbook close by. Type carefully, and double-space the lines. Do not quadruple-space between paragraphs. Proofread carefully; spell-check programs cannot determine the differences among homophones—two, to, too; thrown, throne—nor can they distinguish between mistyped words such as “at” for “ate,” “seven” for “sever” and so on. Proofread not only while the document is on your computer screen but after you have printed it out as well. For conventions concerning the proper handling of quotations, the presentation of titles or works, and the documentation of sources not covered in Manuscript Form (below), see the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*. If you are an English major and do not own a copy of this book, buy one. This information appears in most freshman English grammar handbooks as well. Presentation and Manuscript Form count for the remaining one-third of the grade.

D. Manuscript Form and Other Important Details (a sub-category of Presentation):

1. In documentation follow the style of the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*. Incorporate citations parenthetically in the text. The following are special instructions or reminders—which means that ignoring them might have a special effect on your grade.
2. At the end of your paper, provide a list of “Works Cited” should you include secondary sources such as books, essays, lectures, or class discussion that you use for background research and/or quote in the essay. Keep in mind that if you have a “Works Cited” page, that means you have cited material—be it paraphrase or direct quotation from another’s work—in the text of the essay and, therefore, must have parenthetical citations to so indicate your use of that scholar’s material.
3. In quoting verse (poetry), you must not turn it into prose (all examples below are double spaced as they are to be in your essay):

After first maintaining his identity then learning of his “wife” and assessing his immediate circumstances, he willingly declares himself “. . . a lord indeed, / And not a tinker, nor Christopher Sly” (Ind. 72-3). His shift from prose to blank verse signifies his acceptance of his transformation.

Note several things here: 1. An ellipsis (. . .) indicates that the first few words of line 72 are missing. 2. The two quoted lines appear in quotation marks. 3. Line 72 ends with “indeed,” although the sentence does not end until the conclusion of line 73; thus we must use a space followed by a slash mark followed by another space to indicate the end of line 72 before we can begin the ensuing line. 4. Although line 73 continues and

completes the sentence, the “a” in “And” is capitalized because it is poetry and hence must follow the exact form of the lines as they appear in the edition of the play that you are using. 5. We do not block (that is, put them on separate lines from the text of the sentence) the quoted lines because we are quoting less than four lines. 6. In citing quotations from poetic drama, we must indicate the act, scene, and line numbers—or in this example the Induction—after the quotation (for poetry *per se* one cites line numbers, for prose, page numbers). 7. The quotation mark *closes the quotation*, not the sentence. 8. The parenthetical citation comes after the closed quotation mark and before the period that ends the sentence (if you place your end punctuation *after the quotation* itself, your next sentence *begins with the citation* which makes no sense). 9. Because we are citing poetry we must include the line numbers of the quoted passage, not the page number on which the passage appears because that will differ from edition to edition. Citing the act, scene, and line number(s) allows the reader to find the passage in any edition he/she has available. 10. In the above example as well as in those that follow please observe that we have “introduced” each quotation. That means that we have incorporated the quotation into the matrix of our sentence. 11. Note too that our examples never begin “In act 1, scene 2, at line 44 Sly says” Using such tags is tedious and non-informative given that MLA style requires citation of quoted material at the end of the sentence in which it appears. 12. Our example is in the present, not past, tense; Sly “declares” himself. *When referring to a play’s action, use the present tense.* Yet in referring to past action, one must use past tense: e.g., “Although the Ghost had earlier admonished Hamlet to pursue revenge but ‘Leave [Gertrude] to heaven,’ he reappears in the closet scene to remind him of his ‘almost blunted purpose’ ” (1.5.86, 3.4.111). This sentence indicates the Ghost “admonished” in the past but now “reappears” to enforce Hamlet’s commitment to the charge. Note as well how little quoted material we need to express ourselves.

4. Quotations—whether of poetry or prose—*of four lines or more must be indented and double-spaced*; however, *do not double-space between the introduction to the quotation and the quotation*; doing so would create a quadruple space. Poetry quotations once again *must conform to the format in your edition.*

Any discussion of Petruchio’s taming techniques must consider what he says in

soliloquy:

Thus have I politicly begun my reign,

And ‘tis my hope to end successfully.

My falcon now is sharp and passing empty,

And till she stoop, she must not be full-gorg'd

For then she never looks upon her lure.

(4.1.188-192)

Petruchio's use of falconry imagery emphasizes metaphorically the master/servant relationship that obtained in marriage during the Early Modern Period.

Note several things here: 1. A blocked quotation *does not* require the use of quotation marks; blocking indicates that it is a quotation. Again observe that everything is double-spaced—the analysis and the quotation—and not quadrupled spacing occurs between text and quotation. 2. The left margin is justified, i.e., lined up, with each line beginning with a capitalized letter just as it appears in *The Riverside Shakespeare* in this example. 3. The citation appears on a separate line *below* and to the right-hand side of the last quoted line. 4. Because this passage is from an act and scene rather than the Induction, we must cite act, scene, and line numbers (not page numbers). 5. Current convention for citation uses all Arabic as opposed to a combination of Roman and Arabic numerals, e.g., 4.1.188-192 rather than IV.i.188-192 although you might encounter the latter in some of your secondary reading, especially in older secondary works or those published in Europe.

Compare the following with the correctly formatted example above:

Any discussion of Petruchio's taming techniques must consider what he says in soliloquy:

Thus have I politicly begun my reign, and 'tis my hope to end successfully. My
falcon now is sharp and passing empty, and till she stoop, she must not be full-
gorg'd for then she never looks upon her lure. (IV.i.188-192)

WRONG!!!!

See above for why. Even if we added slash marks to indicate line ends and capitalized the beginnings of the next lines, the format would still be wrong because the quotation is more than three lines long.

5. Prose quotations do *not* have to follow the format in the edition you are using. Because they *are* prose, they have no format; hence, they do *not* require that you indicate the end of lines either in a passage of three lines or less or four lines or more.

Consider the following:

Overwhelmed by the circumstances, Sly responds to the serving men's ministrations by stating the truth as he knows it: "I am Christophero Sly. Call not me honor nor lordship. I ne'er drank sack in my life; and if you give me any conserves, give me conserves of beef" (Ind. 2. 5-7). His use of prose confirms his tinker status.

Note the following: 1. Line 5 in *The Riverside Shakespeare* ends with "honor," but we have no spaces nor slash marks to indicate the line's end because the passage is in prose. 2. A double quotation mark again concludes our quotation with the parenthetical citation following. 3. A period concludes the sentence.

Another example:

Overwhelmed by the circumstances, Sly responds to the serving men's ministrations by stating the truth as he knows it:

I am Christophero Sly. Call not me honor nor lordship. I ne'er drank sack in my life, and if you give me any conserves, give me conserves of beef. Ne'er ask me what raiment I'll wear, for I have not more doublets and backs, no more stockings than legs, nor no more shoes than feet—nay, sometimes more feet than shoes, or such shoes as my toes look through the overleather. (Ind. 2. 5-10)

His use of prose confirms his tinker status.

Note the following: 1. This passage is correct as well because we are dealing with prose. 2. Because we have a blocked prose quotation, the citation appears *after* the period. 3. We block the passage because it is four lines or more. However, we do not really need all five lines to make the point that the passage "confirms his tinker status" since the first example does so with only two lines (see comments on over/under citation in section B: Content.)

6. Words that you interpolate or alter for grammatical/syntactical reasons in a quoted passage must be placed in square brackets.

Consider the following:

Up for the Lord's game, Sly will put off bedding his wife as he is "...loath to fall into [his] dreams again" (Ind. 26-7). Enjoying the good life, Sly keeps a wary eye.

Note the following: 1. The passage is in prose, hence no line-end indicators. 2. The exact text reads "...loath to fall into my dreams again," but that fails syntactically; therefore, we must change "my" to "his" and indicate that we have altered the text by placing square brackets around "his."

7. Commas and periods go *inside* quotation marks; semicolons and colons go *outside*.
8. Your essay must be typed and double-spaced. Do not quadruple space between paragraphs. Have standard one-inch margins on all sides. Indent paragraphs. Business letters employ block paragraphs; literary essay do not.
9. Provide a title page with the essay's title, your name, the date, the course title and number and my name. Give the essay an interesting and appropriate title that will pull a reader in and make him or her want to read the paper. A title that is too cute or too mysterious can keep a reader from taking your work seriously, but a good title is like a preview of the paper's thesis.
10. Number the pages of your paper in the upper right-hand corner and include your last name: Smith-2, Smith-3 etc.
11. Underline or italicize the titles of plays, movies, major poetic works (*The Faerie Queene*, *Paradise Lost*). Put the titles of shorter poems and short stories in quotation marks ("The Second Coming," "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow").
12. Keep a copy of your paper. While I've never lost a paper, you need to keep a copy just in case. Even if I lose your paper, you are still responsible for it.
13. **Do not** present your paper in a plastic cover. Simply paper clip the pages together.
14. **Proofread, proofread, proofread, proofread, proofread, proofread, proofread!!!!!!!**

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