

Independent Novel Study

Literary Essay Planning

Do not wait until one or two days before the essay is due to begin drafting/outlining your thesis statement and body paragraph arguments. Your entire essay will stand by the strength of your thesis or will fall by its weakness. The thesis is the foundation you require to be successful, so careful thought is required when planning your thesis. The thesis is an argument you wish to make about your novel based on your insights while reading it. There are many ways to approach your novel and your thesis.

Consider developing a thesis statement about...

- **Character**
 - Methods of characterizing main character (actions, words, inner thoughts, etc.) and believability of character
 - Evaluating the main character's strengths and weaknesses to determine if they are a good hero/heroine
 - What makes the main character an individual?
 - Evaluating the main character's relationships (healthiness, balance of power, values, importance of different people in their lives)
 - Importance of minor characters in the story
 - How a character changes or evolves through the story and what driving forces cause them to change, what the character learns through the course of the novel, compare/contrast character from beginning to end of novel
 - Compare/contrast two characters within the same novel
- **Effect of Literary Devices**
 - Symbols in the novel and their significance
 - Author's use of foreshadowing, irony, satire, parody, metaphor, etc.
 - How setting affects the way the story is told or how setting mirrors key events in story, how setting creates mood, how the setting exacerbates the central conflict
 - How point of view affects the way the story is told
 - Sources of central conflict in the story and lessons learned through the conflict
- **Theme and Moral Message**
 - Main message readers should take with them after reading novel
 - Different sub-themes throughout novel, and how the sub-themes support the main theme
 - How does the title tie in with the overall theme
 - What insights does this novel teach you about the real world? What lessons that apply in this novel also apply in the world?
- **Writing Style**
 - How an author uses diction (word choice), dialogue, description, sentence structure, narrative technique and plot development to create believable characters, advance the plot, create setting, create suspense, etc.

Some Words of Caution...

Don't try to cram EVERY single literary insight about your novel into your essay. A literary essay should focus on quality and thoroughness of insights, not quantity. Your thesis should be 1-2 sentences and should be VERY SPECIFIC. Focus only on one main topic, then defend that topic three different ways in the body paragraphs. If you chose to make an argument about the theme of the novel, then for example, you can discuss how title, symbolism and foreshadowing (if they apply), are used to illustrate the theme, and be specific in your discussion of each. You CANNOT make any convincing discussions about your novel without specific reference to it – at least 2-3 quotations per body paragraph – and quotations can be from character dialogue or from the narrative. Do not include a quotation without first INTRODUCING it, and don't leave a quotation without EXPLAINING its significance!

Thesis Statements

An essay or written literary analysis needs a strong thesis statement so that it can make a strong argument. Weak thesis statements result in essays with no clear direction or purpose, or essays that rely on plot summary and personal opinions to fill their pages. A good thesis statement is specific; it predicts, limits, and organizes the content of the essay. It notifies the reader about the scope of the essay, telling him/her exactly what your essay will argue and prove. A thesis statement is the controlling idea of your essay. It should be a new idea or opinion that you will argue throughout the essay, based on facts or evidence taken from the literary text itself. The thesis is not a restatement of facts, a summary of events, or a personal unsupportable opinion.

Sometimes it is easier to know how to write a strong thesis by examining non-examples:

Your thesis should not be...

A summary of what happens:

- *EXAMPLE: In "The Circle Game" Joni Mitchell describes a young boy growing up.*
- *EXAMPLE: In Jodi Picoult's novel My Sister's Keeper, the main character must decide if she will sacrifice her freedom for her sister's life.*

Vague:

- *EXAMPLE: Melville and Dostoevsky both use symbols to represent their views of modern man.*
- *EXAMPLE: Both McCarthy's The Road and Garland's The Beach examine evil in mankind.*

A personal opinion:

- *EXAMPLE: I think that Walt Whitman is a great poet and he did a good job using trees as symbols.*
- *EXAMPLE: Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn is just a great American novel.*

A cliché:

- *EXAMPLE: E.E. Cummings proves the old saying that it is better to have loved and lost than never loved at all.*
- *EXAMPLE: In his novels, Gregory Maguire teaches readers that beauty is only skin-deep.*

Strong thesis statements:

- Are very specific and narrow in focus
- Are concise (1-2 sentences)
- State an argument that others could disagree with or refute
- Share a literary insight in the argument
- Structure how the argument will be proved true through the essay

Usually literary thesis statements contain:

- Author(s) first and last names
- Full title of the literary text(s)

- One central arguable idea
- Sometimes the argument is broken down into the sub-points for the body paragraphs

Example Thesis Statements:

Examine the following thesis statements for their strengths. After, try to rank them from most effective to least effective and make some notes about your reasoning.

1. A close examination of the way Roy Neary, the protagonist of *Close Encounters of a Third Kind*, and Elliot, the protagonist of *E.T. the Extraterrestrial*, react to their encounters with aliens demonstrates that director Steven Spielberg uses both films to tell similar stories about the difficulties of growing up.

2. In *The Bonesetter's Daughter* and *The Joy Luck Club*, Amy Tan skillfully illustrates how cultural, generational, and internal conflicts between Chinese American mothers and daughters all add to the difficulty of the immigrant experience.

3. Williamson's poem "The Hockey Players" is a cautionary tale about the importance of allowing children to enjoy the innocence of childhood. Williamson uses contrasting seasonal imagery to show the sharp contrast between children's games and adults' expectations.

4. Two teenage boys' alienation from normal society, loss of self-identity, disgust about the pervert nature of adulthood, and concern for childhood innocence, are central thematic concerns in both J.D. Salinger's novel *Catcher In The Rye* and Richard Kelly's film *Donnie Darko*.

5. Sinclair Lewis' 1922 novel *Babbitt* relies upon the author's use of satire to critique the ignorance, mediocrity, and conformity of the American middle class.

6. Ivan Smith, the protagonist of Shannon MacCarthur's poem "The Fellowship", interacts in all of his relationships with the belief that other individuals are well-intentioned and kind-hearted; others feel morally compelled to prove him right, not because his belief is true, but because it is so rare.

7. *Romeo and Juliet*, *Night*, and *To Kill a Mockingbird* illustrate for readers that prejudice can only be cured when individuals are able to empathize with others who are different from them.

8. Through use of a child narrator in *To Kill A Mockingbird*, Harper Lee is able to illuminate for readers the unbiased nature of children, the prejudices of the adult world, and the need for empathy to avoid prejudice.

9. With Lear's foolish test of love, his series of unwise decisions and the treachery of his daughters, Shakespeare helps readers to realize that rash and reckless actions breed violence and destruction.

10. The tone in "Birches" reveals a poet equally able to portray both the lighter and darker sides in life through his use of setting, imagery and structure.

11. The reader must realize that even though Rowling overtly stresses the positive aspects of love, the *Harry Potter* series contains covert, yet unmistakable negative connotations concerning unintended consequences of relationships.

12. In *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Mark Twain uses the river journey to illustrate Huck's increasing awareness of the moral hypocrisy in the "civilized" South.

Literary Essay - Quoting from Literature

Quote = verb (to quote someone's direct speech)

Quotation = noun (a piece of text)

Suggestions:

- Use quotations selectively; choose only passages which are unusual or interesting
- Ensure that quotations connect to and support what you are trying to say
- Don't expect that the quotations you pick will "do the work for you"! You still have to discuss the quotations you use as they relate to your overall thesis.
- Copy quotations word for word
- Indicate words left out – within the direct quotation – using ellipses (...)
- If you paraphrase, you still need to reference the author and page

Floating Quotations

Quotations from literature must be introduced; they cannot begin a sentence or paragraph on their own, otherwise they are just "floating" in your paragraph, not tied to any particular idea or argument.

TO AVOID FLOATING QUOTATIONS:

1. Use a complete sentence to introduce a quotation followed by a colon.

Ex: Carver describes an incident when his mother attempted to rid their home of his father's whiskey: "I remember my mother pouring his whiskey down the sink" (Carver 71).

2. Use an incomplete sentence to introduce the quotation followed by a comma.

Ex: Carver describes an incident when his mother attempted to rid their home of his father's whiskey. Carver states, "I remember my mother pouring his whiskey down the sink" (Carver 71).

3. Use the quoted material integrated within your own writing.

Ex: Carver describes an incident when his "mother poured his father's whiskey down the sink" (Carver 71).

Short Quotations

-shorter than three lines are inserted into your paragraph, with quotation marks, maintain the double space format, the period appears after the reference.

- Ex.

The vision of a strong woman is made clear in the opening pages of Hagar's story. The author gives us an image of strength and cold: "Above the town, on the hill brow, the stone angel used to land" (Laurence 3).

Long Quotations

- four typed lines or longer are visually separated from the body of your paragraph

- introduce the quotation with a colon

- skip to a new line and indent over one tab (approximately one inch from margin)

- quotation appears single spaced without quotation marks

- the period appears before the reference

- Ex.

He argues that the most effective job-hunting method is what he calls the creative job-hunting approach:

Figuring out your best skills, and favorite knowledges, and then researching any employer

That interests you, before approaching that organization and arranging, through your

Contacts, to see the person there who has the power to hire you for the position you are interested

In. This method, faithfully followed, leads to a job for 86 out of every 100 job hunters. (Bolles 57)

1-2-3 Rule for Using Quotations

1 ~ Introduce the quotation

2 ~ Give the quotation, properly formatted (short or long) and referenced

3 ~ Discuss the quotation and how it connects to or proves your argument

Literary Essay - Self Editing Checklist

I hereby swear that I have carefully edited my essay using the items on the following checklist. I understand that failure to edit my work will result in loss of valuable marks on my essay.

Format

typed on white 8.5 x 11 paper with one-inch margins all around, double spaced

size 12 Times or Arial font

first line of new paragraphs indented, and paragraphs aligned left, not centered or justified

my last name and essay page number in top right header of each page

my essay is 7-8 pages in length (not including title or works cited pages)

Title Page

- title of essay is a condensed statement of your thesis
- title of essay is NOT my book title(s), nor is it "Comparison Essay"
- essay is NOT published so my title is NOT be in quotation marks, italics or underline
- proper MLA format (By, For, Class, Date)

Introductory Paragraph

- hooks the reader with a suitable topic sentence
- shares interesting background or general information on topic to familiarize reader
- properly introduces novels and authors before giving thesis statement
- offers thesis statement at the end of the introduction

Body Paragraphs

- topic sentence clearly indicates the topic of the paragraph
- focus is on analysis and evaluation, no summary
- ideas are well developed and thoroughly explained
- comparison / contrast between novels is evident
- transition words are used to signal new ideas and build bridges between paragraphs
- each body paragraph works to directly prove accuracy of thesis statement
- two to three quotations are used in each
- each quotation is first properly introduced (see handout for three ways to introduce quotations)
- each quotation is properly discussed in relation to paragraph topic, analysis, and thesis

Concluding Paragraph

- does not begin with "In conclusion", "all in all", "as you can see", "in closing" etc.
- reviews main arguments from essay
- re-states thesis in modified wording
- offers the reader something provoking to consider in relation to my topic (food for thought) – something to think about after they've finished reading my essay

Conventions

- no personal pronouns (I, we, my, our, us, you) or personal opinion statements
- no contractions (shouldn't, didn't, can't, won't)
- no run-on sentences, sentence fragments or parallel structure errors
- no conversational, cliché, slang or informal language used
- essay does not reference itself (this essay will show...)
- no spelling errors or commonly confused word errors
- no subject-verb agreement errors
- essay does not switch between verb tenses (pick one and stick to it; present tense is considered most engaging for reader)
- quotations are formatted and referenced properly (see handout on quotations)

Works Cited Page

- page is entitled Works Cited (no underline, bold or italics) and title is centered
- novels are in alphabetical order by author's last name
- novels are referenced according to proper MLA guidelines (see handout)

Final Submission

- I am handing in good copy of essay, rubric, this editing sheet, draft essay, proposal, all journals

Cardinal Essay Sins

- Putting your essay title and name on the same page of your essay. This is what a title page is for: use one!
- Single spacing your essay or using font smaller than 12 or bigger than 14
- Not including a Works Cited page, properly formatted
- Using personal pronouns, contractions or “lay man’s” terms and conversational, informal language
- Not writing a draft and revising the draft before submitting polished essay
- Not handing in your outline and rough draft for marks
- Putting your thesis anywhere but the last sentence or two of your introductory paragraph.
- Starting paragraphs with quotations
- Calling quotations “quotes”
- Throwing quotations in, but not introducing them or giving them any context, and then not discussing their relevance or importance
- Starting a sentence with a quotation! Instead, you must either “weave” a fragment of a quotation into your own sentence, OR, you must introduce the quotation and use a colon.
- Writing less than 5-8 sentences per paragraph (NOT including quotations)
- Changing verb tense! Write in the present tense and be consistent about it
- Not checking spelling or grammatical errors
- Rushing and throwing your words together on the fly the night before!