Notes on Writing about Literature: A Brief Guide to Better Writing

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Reading the Text

Because naïve readers of literature also tend to become naïve writers whose impulse is to reconstruct the text rather than to interpret it or analyze it, the first step in learning how to write about a literary text is learning how to read it. No one is guaranteed instant insight into any work of fiction or any poem. In order to become responsible writers, you must first become responsible readers, learn to ask questions of the text, and attempt to clarify your relationship to the text beyond an emotional response. In other words, you must learn to read critically and analytically.

Learning to read critically means that you cannot read your assigned literary text only once, form some jumbled impressions of its meaning, and attempt to write an essay. When you read a text for the first time, you form surface impressions about the plot, the characters, and so forth. You are more interested in finding out what happens to whom and how the story or the plot unfolds. At this stage of reading, you respond to the text emotionally; you form gut reactions to characters and actions, and may even try to compare what is happening in the literary work to what you know in your own life. At this stage, you are forming impressions about the text and absorbing the surface details; you are probably able to reconstruct the text but not analyze it. After a second and then a third reading, you begin to become more objective in your observations about what you have read. You establish a certain distance from the characters and actions; you begin to discern patterns, to see relationships and connections, to develop inferences, and you are able to form conclusions.* At this stage of your reading, you have developed an intellectual response over a merely emotional one. You now have a clearer perspective on your relationship to the text, on what you as a reader bring to the text, and you are probably more poised to formulate judgments and begin thinking about the essay than you were after the first reading. Remember that experienced readers are made and not born, so here are some suggestions to becoming perceptive readers:

- **Read actively, not passively**. Reading actively means that you read with pencil in hand, underline passages that seem important, make copious notes in the margin of the text or in a notebook, reread puzzling or complicated passages, and ask questions of the text. Why is something happening and what is the significance of its happening at that point in the text? For example, in

Shakespeare's Hamlet, why does Hamlet refrain from killing Claudius in the chapel? Is it really because killing Claudius at prayer would send him to heaven absolved of his sins? Are we to believe that this is the real reason Hamlet does not kill Claudius in the chapel? If so, why? If not, why not? Looking at the text critically and asking questions are the first steps toward interpreting the text rather than reconstructing it.

- **Keep a double entry reading journal**. Take a notebook, divide the page in half and, on the left side, jot down what you think that the text says. Here you can summarize, paraphrase, or take down important quotations (carefully noting their place in the text). On the right side of the page, write your own responses, your questions, your observations, and so forth. Such notes will become helpful in understanding your reactions to the text and help you in formulating judgments.

- **Read editors' prefaces and notes to the text carefully**. Introductions to literary texts always contain important information that places the literary text in the context of the author's other works, in the context of the historical and literary period it was written, in the context of prevailing intellectual ideas of the period, and so forth. Sometimes reading introductions and prefaces after your first reading of the literary text will enhance your subsequent readings and deepen your understanding.

- **In longer works of fiction, like *Crime and Punishment*, mark the important passages** that you might wish to reread before writing your paper. Since novels of such length are difficult to reread in the course of a semester, you will need to reread sections and chapters three or four times before writing your paper.

- **Pay attention to the way in which words are used in context**, to their connotative meaning and not only to their denotative meaning. Looking up unfamiliar words in a collegiate dictionary will not necessarily bring you closer to the meaning of that word in the text or to how the word functions in the text. If you have difficulty with the language or words of an author, pay attention to the notes provided with the text. Most literary texts are annotated to aid your comprehension. For example, most editions of Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown" will tell you that the Puritans used "goodman" the way today we use "mister," and that "goody" was a shortened form of "goodwife," or mistress. Paying attention to the notes that accompany the text will allow you to see that Hawthorne is playing upon the word goodman and may even be having a bit of fun. If your text does not come with annotations, a good source

of information for the way in which words were used in a certain century or period in English literature (for works written in the English language) is The Oxford English Dictionary. For instance, you may be seriously misled into thinking that, in James Joyce's "The Boarding House," Mrs. Mooney indulges in vulgarity when she ponders over Bob Doran's affair with her daughter Polly and considers his suitability as a husband to her daughter: "She knew that he had a good screw for one thing and she suspected he had a bit of stuff put by." The Oxford English Dictionary will tell you that, at the end of the nineteenth century, the word screw was slang for "wages" or "salary" and thus place the meaning of Mrs. Mooney's words into a different context: money.

- **Read all poems aloud**. Reading aloud will help you understand and enjoy the language more and allow you to get a better sense of the rhythm, the sounds, and the poem as a whole. Even if the poem has been translated into English, you can often get a feeling of the original from reading the translation aloud. If you have trouble with a poem's inverted syntax and such syntax impedes your understanding, try to reconstruct the lines in correct syntactical order in order to clarify the meaning for yourself.

- **Above all, start your reading early**. Finishing a literary work the night before your paper is due or reading it partially will never lead to any kind of critical thinking about the text or responsible and informed writing. Remember that nothing can substitute for reading, reading, reading, and then rereading, rereading, and rereading the original text. Take pleasure in what you read. Develop a passion for the work. Passionate readers who take pleasure in what they read are bound to become passionate writers who argue their points vigorously and with conviction. Passionate writers are not content to skim the surface of the text in search of the obvious or the superficial. They are like miners who dig deeply beneath the surface of the text to unearth its riches and to equip themselves with a better understanding of the text's complexities.

***Note**: For a very good explanation of the three interrelated stages of reading literary texts, see any edition of Robert DiYanni's Literature: Reading Fiction, Poetry, Drama, and the Essay. New York: McGraw Hill. The book is available for perusal in the John Jay College Writing Center.

Writing the Essay

Writing an essay about literature may seem at first a daunting and mystifying process. However, writing about literature is no more difficult than writing for any other subject. In any paper about literature, you are trying to

persuade your reader that your reading of the text (that is, your interpretation or your analysis) is worth considering because it adds a valuable dimension to understanding the text, a dimension that may not be immediately apparent to your reader. In other words, in an essay about any literary text, you are trying to persuade your reader to look at the text in a way in which perhaps he has not looked at before. Your slant on the reading, your position, and your insights would therefore lead your reader to a richer understanding and appreciation of the text. Your reader may not agree with your interpretation of the text but then your job, as a writer, is not to prove that your interpretation is the only valid one. Your job as a writer about literature is to offer a well thought out position on the text, a reading that is responsibly developed and sustained throughout your paper.

Remember that not all interpretations of the text are equally good or equally acceptable. Partial familiarity with the text will never lead to any responsible interpretations. Twisting or mangling the text to fit some preconceived or half-baked notions about it will also never lead to responsible interpretations. Imposing your own religious or moral predilections on an author's meaning will also never lead to worthwhile interpretations. However, knowing the text thoroughly, understanding it, and thinking long and deeply about it are more likely to lead to a responsible interpretation. To know whether an interpretation is valid, you need to test all your assumptions against the text. If the text bears out your assumptions and interpretation, then you are on the right track. If the text sustains your interpretation only partially, or you seem to be making claims that are not backed up by the text, you need to do more reading and thinking about your text before attempting the paper.

Ultimately, writing an essay about literature is the result of discovering that you have insights about a text, insights that you feel deeply about and that you wish to communicate to your reader clearly and in an organized and logical fashion.

The Introduction

The introduction to your paper should arouse your reader's interest; it should place the literary work within the context of the specific issues that your paper will raise and it should define those issues. Under no circumstances should you begin your introduction with abstract generalities that lie outside the scope of your paper. Many times inexperienced writers are afraid to tackle their topic or question directly and write global introductions full of abstract generalities.

For example, if you are asked to discuss the idea of marriage in Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice, **do not begin** your paper with global statements about marriage in general and what a sacred and time-cherished institution it has been since time immemorial. Such an introduction has nothing to do with the novel specifically and only wastes your reader's time.

Examine the four introductions below. You will see that all of these introductions begin simply by placing the stories in the context of the writer's discussion, by defining the issues that the paper will raise, and by narrowing to a thesis statement.

1)

In Flannery O'Connor's "Good Country People" and Alice Munro's "Wild Swans," we meet two women who are completely unprepared to experience their first sexual encounter. The perspectives that Hulga and Rose adopt are shaped by the teachings of their mothers (or, in Rose's case, stepmother), Mrs. Hopewell and Flo respectively. Although Mrs. Hopewell and Flo share a patronizing manner and a tendency to stereotype, Hulga's and Rose's feelings for their mothers are quite different. Despite this difference, they are equally influenced by their mothers' philosophies, each sharing a desire to break away from their routine lives. Unfortunately, Hulga and Rose do not realize that what gives birth to this craving is also what makes them ill-equipped to handle the situations that set them on their individual courses of transformation.

2)

The characterization of our protagonist Connie is vital to an understanding of her ripeness for seduction in Joyce Carol Oates' short story "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" Connie's youth and vanity, coupled with her antagonistic relationship with the members of her family, effectively set the stage for her seduction by the older Arnold Friend.

3)

In Flannery O'Connor's "Good Country People," the cynical, rude, and world-weary Hulga believes herself to be on such a high philosophical and intellectual plane that she is without illusion. Her main belief is to believe in nothing. Considering the frustration and dullness of her life with her mother and Mrs. Freeman, it is no wonder that Hulga assumes a jaded outlook. Unfortunately, this weariness does not come from extensive life experience and she is not prepared to deal with Manley Pointer, an example of the "good country people" that her mother is so fond of. Hulga does not

practice what she preaches, and she trusts who he says he is without question. By doing so, Hulga loses her artificiality and gains cause for true cynicism.

4)

"Good Country People" is a story about prejudice, manipulation, and victimization. Mrs. Hopewell's personal prejudices along with Hulga's internalization of these prejudices, their problematic mother-daughter relationship, and Hulga's low self-image provide fertile ground for Hulga's victimization. Hulga and her mother both maintain a superior attitude toward each other as well as the people with whom they interact in this story. It is this attitude that ultimately leads to Manley Pointer's ability to take advantage of Hulga.

Please note that none of these introductions wastes any of the reader's time with abstract generalities. Also none of these introductions makes it painfully apparent to the reader that the writer is answering a specific assignment. All of them do, however, inform the reader of the paper's argument.

The Thesis Statement

An essay about a piece of literature is NOT a plot summary of it. Rather, it is an argument about it. If you find yourself reverting to plot summary instead of analyzing the text and arguing your point about it, stop and think again about what you are trying to prove. In order to interpret rather than describe, analyze rather than summarize, all essays about literature must contain **a thesis statement**. Think about it this way: if you had only one idea that you wished to communicate most to your reader, what would it be? The thesis statement is the most important idea in your essay. It contains your position, your opinion, the conclusion that you have formulated as a result of close reading, and the hook on which you hang your entire argument. It is always a good idea to make your thesis the last sentence of your introduction so that nothing else distracts your reader from the statement of your position, the central idea and its development in the body of your paper.

Again, the thesis is a claim, an opinion that needs to be proved valid by your discussion. It needs to be both restrictive and precise and formulated to fit the scope and length of your assignment. Here are a few guidelines that may help you to avoid some thesis statement pitfalls*:

- **A thesis statement is <u>NOT</u> an announcement of your subject or a description of your intentions**. At all costs avoid statements such as, "In this essay I will argue that . . ." or "In this essay I will prove that . . ." because such statements are awkward and make you sound naïve and a novice.

- **A thesis statement is <u>NOT</u> cluttered with expressions such as "In my opinion," "I believe," and the like**. Such phrases make you sound defensive and uncertain and waste your reader's time. Usually, the important part comes after such expressions, so leave them out.

- **Avoid oversimplified claims** because such will never persuade your reader that you have a thorough understanding of the text or that you have any worthwhile interpretation to offer. For example, "In William Faulkner's 'A Rose for Emily,' Miss Grierson is crazy" is certainly an oversimplified claim because it overlooks and undermines the complexity of the character. Making oversimplified claims will not give you much credibility as an insightful reader of the text.

- **A thesis statement is NEVER a statement of fact**. Thesis statements are assertions of opinions that take the form of generalizations whose validity needs to be argued vigorously with discussion and examples from the text. Facts cannot be argued. To say that "Nathaniel Hawthorne penned 'Young Goodman Brown'" is to present a fact that cannot be argued.

- **A thesis statement <u>DOES</u> <u>NOT</u> present an idea that is self-evident or dead-ended**. For example, saying that "Shakespeare's 'When my love claims she is made of truth" is a sonnet," or that "*Hamlet* ends tragically for the hero," would get you nowhere. These are not analytical statements that lead to discussion or argument. For another example, "At the end of John Updike's 'A & P' Sammy quits his job" is a statement that does not promise a discussion. However, saying that "Sammy quits his job at the A & P **because** he comes to a realization that people are more important than policies" would bring you closer to a workable thesis.

- **Limit your claim to a statement that you can prove within the assigned length of your paper.** For example, the claim that "Both Hamlet and Othello are heroes" is too broad and unfocused and not a thesis statement at all. Saying that "Both Hamlet and Othello are heroes because . . ." would bring the idea

closer to being a thesis but the claim would still be too broad to receive adequate development in a short paper.

- **A thesis is NEVER stated in form of a question**. The thesis is an opinion that the paper will demonstrate as valid or feasible in light of your development with persuasive examples from the text.

- **Above all, remember that the thesis statement is a complete thought** that has a subject, a verb, and a controlling idea expressed in key or operative words that indicate to your reader the direction in which you will take your discussion.

The following examples of weak and strong theses should help:

Weak: In Book I of The Iliad, Homer presents Achilles and Agamemnon as both similar and different.

Strong: In Book I of Homer's Iliad we see how pride, stubbornness, and power—qualities that Achilles and Agamemnon share—seem to unite and divide the two as well. Ironically, the same qualities that unite them also make it impossible for them to coexist.

The first example is weak because everything under the sun is both similar and different and the thesis does not make a judgment or express any analytical thought. The second example is strong because it is restrictive and precise. The operative words (*pride, stubbornness, power*) indicate the lines along which the writer will set up the comparison and contrast and the thesis makes a definite claim or judgment.

***Note:** The thesis statement pitfalls have been adapted from Jean Wyrick's Steps to Writing Well. They have been modified and adjusted to the demands of formulating a thesis when writing about literature.

Organizing the Essay

The organization of your paper will depend to a great extent on your thesis statement. If you have formulated a restrictive and precise thesis statement with focused key words or hooks upon which to hang your argument, organizing your paper will be fairly easy.

Make your paper follow a coherent, unified, logical, and progressive structure. In other words, lead up to the main point of your argument in a logical and progressive manner. Your body paragraphs should have clear topic sentences or transitional generalizations that develop one aspect of the thesis each. Develop each of your topic sentences fully with discussion and evidence from the text; make each of your main ideas lead logically into the next main idea.

To signal the progression of your ideas, use transitional words and phrases that clearly indicate the logical relationship between those ideas and that provide for smooth passage from one paragraph to the next, from one idea to the next.

Test the logical organization of your ideas this way: write out your thesis and each of your topic sentences and see whether they signal a logical and coherent progression of ideas. Your thesis statement and your topic sentences should by themselves provide a microcosmic view of the entire essay. If your topic sentences do not suggest a logical progression or sequence, then you need to reorganize the essay.

There are several ways in which you can control the progression of your ideas. For example, you may choose to organize your essay in a climactic order, that is, progressing from the less significant idea to the most significant idea. Or you may organize the essay by moving from the known to the unknown, from the simple to the complex, and so forth.

To write a coherent and unified essay means that no portion of your argument can be taken out of sequence or break away from a tightly knit overall structure and the development of the larger argument.

Remember that organizing an essay effectively does not come to anyone instantaneously. It needs careful thinking and testing of ideas against the promise of the thesis statement and careful planning.

Writing the Conclusion

Often students overlook the importance of writing an effective conclusion. They are content with a mechanical restatement of their thesis or a repetition of a part of their introduction. They write a two or three sentence conclusion and think that it is sufficient. However, a conclusion can make or break a paper. While it is true that the conclusion should return in some manner to the main thrust of the essay and its main idea, it is important to leave your reader with something to think

about. Doing so **does not mean** that you introduce new ideas into your conclusion or that you recant your argument. It means that you place your argument into a larger perspective and try to show how the issues that you have discussed or analyzed would benefit from further analysis.

At all cost, you should avoid tacking on a mechanical and repetitive conclusion or making excuses for what you have or have not done in the paper.

Writing a Comparison or Contrast Essay: A Brief Refresher
(from Prof. Pat Licklider's handouts for LIT 230, 231, & 232 courses)

To write a comparison or contrast essay that is easy to follow, first decide what the similarities or differences are by writing lists on scrap paper. Which are more significant, the similarities or the differences? Plan to discuss the less significant first, followed by the more significant. It is much easier to discuss ONLY the similarities or ONLY the differences, but you can also do both.

Then for organizing your essay, choose one of the plans described below, whichever best fits your list. Finally, and this is important, what main point (thesis) might you make in the essay about the two people/things being compared? Do not begin writing until you have a point that the similarities or differences you want to use help to prove. Your point should help shape the rest of what you say: For example, if you see that one of your similarities or differences is unrelated to the point, throw it out and think of one that is related. Or revise your point. Be sure this main point is clearly and prominently expressed somewhere in the essay.

Plan A: Use Plan A if you have many small similarities and/or differences. After your introduction, say everything you want to say about the first work or character, and then go on in the second half of the essay to say everything about the second work or character, comparing or contrasting each item in the second with the same item in the first. In this format, all the comparing or contrasting, except for the statement of your main point, which you may want to put in the beginning, goes on in the SECOND HALF of the piece.

Plan B: Use Plan B if you have only a few, larger similarities or differences. After your introduction, in the next paragraph discuss one similarity or difference in BOTH works or characters, and then move on in the next paragraph to the second similarity or difference in both, then the third, and so forth, until you're done. If

you are doing both similarities and differences, juggle them on scrap paper so that in each part you put the less important first ("X and Y are both alike in their social positions . . ."), followed by the more important ("but X is much more aware of the dangers of his position than is Y"). In this format, the comparing or contrasting goes on in EACH of the middle parts.

Using Evidence to Strengthen Your Arguments
(from Prof. Allison Pease's Writing Center workshop)

- What Is Evidence?

  Evidence is the facts or sources that support your written argument.
  In a literature course, for instance, evidence would be a quotation from the text that helps you make your point. In a write-up of a scientific experiment, evidence would be the data you collected in your experiment that prove or disprove a thesis.

- Why Do We Need Evidence?

  Evidence is central to any written argument because it provides the facts around which you create your argument, your opinion. Without evidence, an argument is a windy, flimsy statement of one person's opinion. With evidence, an argument is grounded in facts and given shape. Evidence is the critical link that helps you prove your points.

- Can Evidence Speak for Itself?

  No. This is where you come in. It is simply not enough to drop a quotation into your paper and expect your reader to be convinced of your point.

- So How Can We Speak for and through Evidence?

  When you use evidence, your role is to show your reader that evidence supports your argument. Consider your role as writer analogous to that of a lawyer in a court of law. When you introduce evidence, you must tell the jury--your readers--why this evidence supports your argument. Evidence must be analyzed and interpreted. What does the evidence say and how should your reader understand it? How does the evidence support the larger ideas at work in the paper? You need to make these connections for your reader.

Examples

- Unsuccessful Use of Evidence (as if it spoke for itself):

  Frederick Douglass gains self-confidence when he fights back against the cruel slave-owner Mr. Covey. Douglass notes that the battle "rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom and revived within me a sense of my own manhood. It recalled the departed self-confidence and inspired me again with the determination to be free" (Douglass, 1845, p. 43). This quotation alone captures the essence of Douglass's feelings after his self-reliance was challenged by his slave master and he prevailed.

  Problem*:* This use of evidence does not work because the author does not show why the evidence is important, or what it does. The writer repeats rather than analyzes what is said. Her thesis is about self-reliance, so she should focus on how this quotation shows that Douglass became self-reliant.

- Another Unsuccessful Use of Evidence (the writer "dumps" the quotation and does not explain it):

  As a self-conscious boy, Douglass relied on other slaves' mistakes to protect him. He was always aware of how white men could trick slaves and make money for themselves and so he never trusted white men. "White men have been known to encourage slaves to escape, and then, to get the reward, catch them and return to their masters" (p. 25).

  Problem: Not only does the writer fail to introduce the quotation with his own words but he also "dumps" the evidence. What did you learn from this paragraph? What's the author's point? Are the first and second sentences connected? To leave a quotation at the end of a paragraph is to leave your job undone. You must tell the reader why the quotation is significant and show how the quotation connects back to your main idea.

- Successful Use of Evidence to Support Ideas:

  Emerson believes that people must accept who they are and embrace their talents and their minds. We've all been taught the saying, "No pain, no gain." Emerson goes one step further, claiming that "A man is relieved and gay when he has put his heart into his work and done his best, but what he has said or done otherwise, shall give him no peace. It is a deliverance that does not

deliver" (Emerson, 1993, p. 20). He is explaining here that one's heart truly needs to be dedicated to his task in order to reach fulfillment. Achieving fulfillment is, in essence, a step towards self-reliance.

What Is Good Here: This author uses evidence, an actual quotation and correct citation of author, year, and page number, a) to provide a scholarly record of where to find this reference, and b) to support his points. The writer's thinking here is clear in that he analyzes the evidence and draws conclusions from it.

- What to Keep in Mind:

  Whenever you use a quotation, show your reader the thinking that went into choosing that quotation. What does it mean and why is it relevant to your point? Evidence is the framework of an argument, but you must do the arguing around that framework. If you want your reader to believe your argument, you must do the thinking for your reader. It is up to you to tell your reader what to think about the evidence you provide.

Making Quotations Fit Grammatically

It is important to fit anything that you are quoting into the grammar of your own sentences. If you want to quote only part of a sentence from the text you are discussing, you must add words of your own, outside the quotation marks, to make it a complete sentence. If you are quoting a complete sentence, be sure that any words of your own that you add do not make it ungrammatical. Here is a part of a sentence from an essay on Dante's *Inferno* that has not been fit smoothly into the writer's own sentence:

> While the gluttons writhe in the slime and garbage, they are tormented by Cerberus, who "barking thunder on these dead souls, who wished that they were deaf" (*Inferno*, Canto VI, ll. 32-33). Since they wallowed in food and drink in life and produced nothing but garbage, in death they wallow in garbage and get nothing to eat or drink.

By removing the first "who" or by adding "was," the sentence with its quotation will read more grammatically:

> While the gluttons writhe in the slime and garbage, they are tormented by Cerberus, "barking thunder on these dead souls, who wished that they were deaf" (*Inferno*, ll. 32-33). Since they wallowed in food and drink in life and

> produced nothing but garbage, in death they wallow in garbage and get nothing to eat or drink.

OR

> While the gluttons writhe in the slime and garbage, they are tormented by Cerberus, who was "barking thunder on these dead souls, who wished that they were deaf" (*Inferno*, Canto VI, ll. 32-33). Since they wallowed in food and drink in life and produced nothing but garbage, in death they wallow in garbage and get nothing to eat or drink.

Here is another example of a poorly integrated quotation; it is a complete sentence plus part of another sentence whose subject and verb have been omitted. The result is very difficult to understand:

> One punishment similar to the sin being punished is the one for those who misused their wealth while they were on earth. As Dante says, "the sound of their own screams, straining their chests, they rolled enormous weights/ and when they met and clashed against each other/ they turned to push the other way" (*Inferno*, Canto VII, ll. 25-29). Because they fought with one another on earth over wealth, they clash in hell, punishing one another.

We can fix the problem by omitting the first part of the quotation, or by adding words:

> One punishment similar to the sin being punished is the one for those who misused their wealth while they were on earth. As Dante describes these sinners, "straining their chests, they rolled enormous weights/ and when they met and clashed against each other/ they turned to push the other way" (*Inferno*, Canto VII, ll. 25-29). Because they fought with one another on earth over wealth, they clash in hell, punishing one another.

OR

> One punishment similar to the sin being punished is the one for those who misused their wealth while they were on earth. As Dante says, these sinners move to "the sound of their own screams," and, "straining their chests, they rolled enormous weights/ and when they met and clashed against each other/ they turned to push the other way" (Inferno, Canto VII, ll. 25-29). Because

they fought with one another on earth over wealth, they clash in hell, punishing one another.

Punctuating Quotations Correctly

I. When Quoting Directly from the Text Inside Your Own Sentences (Without Parenthetical Citations of Author, Year, & Page)

A. *Commas* and *periods* must be included *inside* the quotation marks, that is, before closing the quotation marks.

Examples: Connie's sister, June, who is **"twenty-four and still live[s] at home,"** is a thorn in Connie's side.

Obviously, Connie does not have a loving relationship with her mother: **"'She makes me want to throw up sometimes,' she complained to her friends."**

B. *Semicolons* and *colons* are always placed *outside* the quotation marks, that is, after closing the quotation marks.

Examples: Flannery O'Connor's **"Good Country People":** The Two Faces of Hulga

(*Ditto* for semicolons; they go outside the quotation marks)

C. *Question marks* and *exclamation points* belong *inside* the quotation marks if the quotation itself is a question or an exclamation and *outside* the quotation marks if the quotation is part of a sentence that is a question or an exclamation.

Examples: **"Stop gawking at yourself. Who are you? You think you're so pretty?"**

He shouted, **"You're fired!"**

Why does Connie's mother insist that her daughter's **"mind was all filled with trashy daydreams"?**

II. When Quoting Directly from the Text Inside Your Own Sentences and Citing Author, Year, & Page in Parenthesis (APA style)

A. When citations of author and page are included in parenthesis after the quotation, *commas* and *periods* are placed *after the parenthesis only*, that is, *outside the closed parenthesis.*

Examples: Connie's sister, June, who is **"twenty-four and still live[s] at home" (Oates, 1966, p. 438),** is a thorn in Connie's side.

Obviously, Connie does not have a loving relationship with her mother: **"'She makes me want to throw up sometimes,' she complained to her friends" (Oates, 1966, p. 438).**

B. On the other hand, question marks and exclamation points *should never be placed outside* a closed parenthesis because they look awkward.

"Stop gawking at yourself. Who are you? You think you're so pretty?" (Oates, 1966, p. 438).

C. However, if the case arises, *do place semicolons* and *colons outside* the closed parenthesis.

Example: **"She couldn't decide if she liked him or if he was just a jerk" (Oates, 1966, p. 441);** at least this is what Connie thinks.

The same goes for colons.

III. For Set-Off or Blocked Quotations Followed by Parenthetical Citations.

Rule: When you quote more than *four lines* of the original text, the quotations must be blocked or set-off (you indent the entire quotation and do not use quotation marks unless they appear in the original). The punctuation comes wherever it appears in the text, that is, before the parenthetical citation of author, year, and page.

Examples:

To Connie's mother, June is obviously the favorite daughter:

> Connie had to hear her praised all the time by her mother and her mother's sisters. June did this, June did that, she saved money and helped clean the house and cooked and Connie couldn't do a thing, her mind was all filled with trashy **daydreams. (Oates, 1966, p. 438)**

Note: Remember that everything in your paper must be double spaced, and that goes for blocked quotations as well. Please do not put periods in two places. Follow the above rules religiously. <u>In the above examples, I highlighted the places in which the quotations are punctuated.</u> Again, all the above examples deal only with matters of form, with how to punctuate, and not with how to handle evidence.

Following the Conventions and Other Matters of Form

When you are dealing with literary texts and writing about literature in general, you need to be aware of several important conventions.

- ***Titles of Literary Works:*** Enclose in quotation marks the titles of short works, or anthologized pieces, pieces that are usually published in larger works. The rule of thumb is that you place quotation marks around the titles of short stories, short poems, journal articles, essays, and so forth (for example, "To His Coy Mistress," "Good Country People"). Short poems or sonnets without titles are identified by first lines without capitalization (for example, "I wandered lonely as a cloud," "When my love swears that she is made of truth," and so forth). Longer pieces, or pieces published independently, are underlined or italicized, but not both. These include plays, novels, anthologies, long poems (i.e., The Odyssey, The Iliad, Paradise Lost, Hamlet, and so forth).

- ***Your Titles***: Make the title of your essay a phrase, not a sentence, and see that it is a clear indication of the contents of your paper. Your titles should be related to the thesis statement. Please do not announce the method that you are following in your title. For example, indicating that your paper is a comparison and contrast, or analysis, or interpretation should not be part of your title. Titles need not be underlined or put into quotation marks. However, the author's work should be part of your title, properly quoted or italicized. If you have a title and subtitle, separate them with a colon (i.e., **Flannery O'Connor's "Good Country People": The Two Faces of Hulga**).

  Follow proper rules of capitalization in your own titles without getting confused by the lack of capitalization demanded by the APA style of documentation on your References page. Always capitalize the first and last words of your title and subtitle and all other important words, with the exception of articles, prepositions and conjunctions. Here are some examples:

  The Metamorphosis of Sammy in John Updike's "A & P"

  or

  Turning the Tables on Time in Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress"

  Please notice that because all good titles appear in phrase form, there is no period placed after the title. You may, however, use a question mark if part of your title is a question.

- ***Authors' Names***: As a rule, mention the full name of the author in the beginning of your paper and then refer to him or her by last name only, unaccompanied by Mr. or Mrs.

- ***Using the Present Tense***: In writing about literature, use the present tense when discussing the characters, their actions, and so forth. Characters do not have a historical past or, for that matter, future. They continuously spring to life each time we read a story, play, or novel. They live in an eternal present. Also use the present tense when referring to the author in the context of his work. Here is the distinction. You may say that "Joyce Carol Oates **wrote** 'Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?' in 1966" because Oates has a historical past. However, you should say, "In the story, Oates **depicts** a young girl on the threshold of awakening sexuality" because you are discussing the author in the context of her work. As a rule, you need to employ the simple present, not the present progressive: "Oates depicts," ***not*** "Oates is depicting . . . "

- ***Some Matters of Style***: Do no inject yourself into the paper; that is, try to leave aside all references to yourself. You want your reader to focus on your objective reading of the text, not on you. It will be obvious to your reader that it is you, the writer, who interprets or analyzes the text. Let your interpretation speak for itself without drawing attention to yourself. Above all, do not moralize, preach, or insult the author or read the text through the distorted lens of your own prejudices, whether they be religious, moral, or political. Doing so would render your interpretation subjective at best and may make your reader discount or undervalue your insights.

  Also try to avoid the temptation of saying that an author "uses" characters in such or such a way or that a poet "uses" images to do such or such. It is better to say that characters or images "function" one way or another, perhaps to convey an idea or to forward a theme. To say that an author "uses" characters or images imputes a kind of intentionality to authors and you really have no way of knowing what an author intended to do.

- **Pitfalls in Quoting:** Think of the author's text as inviolable. When you quote, make sure that you quote precisely without changing or mangling the text. If you need to interpolate (add or indicate slight changes in the use of capital letters or tense), place square brackets [ ] around whatever you change. If you omit anything, use three dots, called an ellipsis (. . .).

Often, novice writers think that they are doing a good job in quoting the text when they announce what they are quoting, quote the material, and then tell the reader what they have quoted. Avoid such announcements at all costs. Instead, incorporate your evidence smoothly and seamlessly into your own sentences and never dump into your paper disembodied quotations, that is, quotations that are not properly introduced by or anchored to your own sentences. (Please see the "Using Evidence to Strengthen Your Arguments" and "Making Quotations Fit Grammatically" portions of this document.)

General Criteria for Evaluating Writing about Literature

The following questions may help you edit your paper and prepare a better assignment:

- Is the title of my paper a phrase and does it relate to the thesis of the paper? Does my title include the title of the work under discussion? Do I capitalize all the important words in my title?

- Does my introduction begin directly by placing the literary work within the context of the specific issues that my paper will raise and do I define those issues? Is it clear from my introduction where my paper is headed?

- Does my introduction end with a focused thesis statement that is both restrictive and precise?

- Do my paragraphs have clear topic sentences or transitional generalizations that relate directly to the thesis? Do I follow a discernable pattern of development or organization? Is the organization or order of my paragraphs clear? Do I use any recognizable technique of development?

- Does my paper contain logical paragraphing, a logical sequence of paragraphs, and are the paragraphs well developed and of adequate length? Do the sentences within my paragraphs also follow a logical sequence?

- Do I have transitions between paragraphs and ideas?

- Do I analyze and argue or do I merely summarize the plot or retell the action?

- Do I incorporate my evidence successfully into my discussion, explain it and integrate it properly, or do I merely dump lengthy quotations into my paper under the assumption that they will be self-explanatory?

- Do I pile on quotations on top of quotations instead of writing my own judicious discussion and analysis?

- Are my in-text quotations too long? Should they be blocked?

- Do I quote precisely from the text? Do I use quotations that make sense in the context of my own sentences and are my quotations introduced properly or coherently attached to my own sentences?

- Do I quote properly material already within quotation marks in the text?

- Do I punctuate my in-text quotations properly, with *and* without parenthetical documentation? Do I punctuate my blocked quotations properly in light of parenthetical documentation?

- Do I consistently use the present tense in discussing the text?

- Does my discussion have a proper voice or point of view? Is the language of my paper admissible, the diction appropriate?

- Does my paper analyze the text objectively or do I inject all sorts of personal prejudices and beliefs into my paper and moralize, preach, or attack the author or the characters?

- If the assignment called for writing a comparison and contrast paper have I mistakenly discussed the two works separately and then tried to do some comparing and contrasting in the conclusion only? Or does my paper maintain a proper dialogue or interplay between the two texts that I am analyzing?

- Have I eliminated all grammatical or sentence sense errors that may cloud or entirely impede the reader's comprehension?

- Does my paper still contain verb tense errors, subject-verb agreement errors, fragments, run-ons, pronoun reference problems, spelling errors, and errors in the use of the apostrophe?

- Finally, does my discussion end with a logical conclusion that does not merely repeat the thesis or the introduction? Have I been careful not to introduce any new ideas or points not covered by the paper? Do I leave my reader with something to think about?

Sources and Useful On-Line Sites for Writing about Literature

The following are useful on-line guidelines and suggestions for writing about literature:

http://www.stockton.edu/~kinsellt/litresources/writingsuggestions.html

http://rwc.hunter.cuny.edu/writing/on-line/lit-guide.html

http://rwc.hunter.cuny.edu/writing/on-line/lit-poem.html

http://rwc.hunter.cuny.edu/writing/on-line/qfor-lit.html

http://www.english.wayne.edu/~peterson/fiction/litbasics.html

http://www.english.wayne.edu/~peterson/fiction/quotations.html

http://www.english.wayne.edu/~peterson/fiction/developessay.html

http://www.english.wayne.edu/~peterson/fiction/litessay.html

http://www.english.uiuc.edu/cws/wworkshop/tips/writtechlitpaper.htm

http://www.english.uiuc.edu/siewers/106/writinglit.htm

http://polaris.acast/nova.edu/~alford/writelit.html

http://www.uvm.edu/~wstephan/dante/writelit.htm

http://www.meredith.edu/learn/wrtngctr/writhelp/literatr.htm

http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/general/gl_lit.html

http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/literature.html

http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~wricntr/bktext1.html

http://www.cwrl.utexas.edu/~babydoll/coursematerial/spring96/closereading.html

http://www.ricks.edu/Ricks/employee/kellerr/handouts/eng250/writing.htm

http://www.wwnorton.com/introlit/wal/walhome.htm

Additional Resources

A Literary Index
http://www.vanderbilt.edu/AnS/english/flackcj/Litmain.html

This site is an index to numerous literary and writing resources (with brief descriptions of each) on the web. Its contents include literature indices, doing literary research, English departments and literary institutes, archives of electronic texts, books and presses, composition, rhetoric and writing, and the teaching of literature.

One link you might find particularly helpful is to Jack Lynch's Rutgers site:
http://www.andromeda.rutgers.edu/~jlynch/Lit/

The Voice of the Shuttle
http://vos.ucsb.edu/shuttle/english.html

This site includes numerous resources on literature in English, as well as links to other literatures. The site has a search function.

CUNY Graduate Center Resources for Literature
http://web.gc.cuny.edu/library/Research/lit.htm

This is a very extensive site with hyperlinks at the top to guide you through. It includes a pretty extensive list of good sites devoted to individual authors ("Selected Literary Figures") listed alphabetically.