



WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

Writing about Literature

Every essay that offers interpretations of literature is an effort to persuade, not to prove. Whether or not the reader of the essay finally agrees with the writer's main argument, the essay is effective if it stimulates a thoughtful reconsideration of the work of literature under discussion. This point may become clearer if we examine the interpretation of literature and the interpretation of the U.S. Constitution. The words of *Hamlet* and the words of the Constitution do not change, but people have always disagreed about what those words mean, and they will continue to disagree so long as both documents seem important.

People make passionate and complicated arguments about each document in an effort to reach the truth. But though a person may reach a "workable" truth that convinces a number of people, he or she can never establish an interpretation that will convince everyone. In fact, most people who feel strongly about *Hamlet* or the Constitution change their opinions over the years. Just as Supreme Court decisions—which are interpretations of the Constitution—have often been in direct conflict with preceding decisions, judgments about literature change as cultural values and interests change. The attainment of a final, absolute truth doesn't seem likely or even possible. Your aim in an essay about literature is to engage in a process of investigation, commitment, and persuasion which leads to a deeper understanding, a clearer and more intense engagement with a work of literature.

GUIDELINES FOR LITERATURE PAPERS

In fashioning an argument about a work of literature, it is useful to think about three different elements involved in the process:

- the writer of the essay
- the reader (or audience) of the essay
- the text (or subject matter) of the literature

Persuading the Reader

The most effective essays usually express the strong personal feelings of the writer. But the writer's main task in writing about literature is not to talk about personal feelings; rather, the writer communicates with the reader in such a way that the reader will be persuaded to see the text in a new and interesting way. The writer should ordinarily deal with the ideas and emotions that the work of literature might arouse in any reader.

It may be helpful to think of the reader as another person in the class who has read the text carefully but who may not have noticed the things that you have noticed. Since you can assume that the reader has read the text, you do not usually have to summarize the plot or describe obvious elements of the text, but you cannot assume that the reader agrees with you about even the basic significance of the text.

Your experience in discussions of literature should convince you that people often disagree about many issues. However the writer and the reader do at least agree on what words make up the text. Therefore, any debatable issue is usually best presented through reference to specific words, scenes, situations in the text. You will have to decide which of your assertions will be accepted by most readers. For example, depending on your audience, "Ophelia goes mad with grief from Hamlet's rejection of her and her father's death" might not require explanation, whereas "Hamlet's primary motivation is disgust with his own sexual nature" might. Remember that a simple assertion of an idea, however powerfully stated, is usually not as persuasive as an assertion followed by evidence.

An essay of four to six pages (about 1000 to 1500 words) can ordinarily deal effectively with no more than one main controlling argument and two or three subtopics. A topic such as "the interaction of characters in *Hamlet*" is too broad; "Hamlet's desire for revenge" is better focused; and "the self-destructive nature of Hamlet's desire for revenge" is probably best of all. Because you can assume that your reader has also read the work of literature you are discussing, you need not summarize the plot of a story or a play or the basic situation of a poem unless you think there is a real problem in understanding this material. Instead, you should move directly to the specific topic your essay will pursue.

Creating a Topic

Your main purpose in an essay about literature is to interpret rather than to describe. You should, therefore, include only those features of a work of literature that are necessary to support your specific interpretations. The statement that John Keats died at the age of twenty-five or that he is usually considered one of the great English Romantic poets may be true and interesting but absolutely irrelevant to the particular topic of your essay. Similarly, the fact that a line of verse is in iambic pentameter is relevant only if you use it to make some statement about the impact or meaning of the line. To put it another way, the question is not so much "what" verse technique is used as "how" it is used to create a particular impact.

Because you are writing about literature and about the responses that a number of readers might have to it, you should focus attention directly on the work itself. This means that you should avoid, in most instances, direct references to yourself. "I have chosen to discuss the image of pepperoni pizza in this story" is not nearly so concise, emphatic, or interesting as a direct statement: "The image of pepperoni pizza reveals the narrator's secret cravings." The first statement is not only wordier but less informative, and it deflects attention toward you and away from the subject of the essay—the work of literature itself. Furthermore, personal references often lead the writer to make statements which seem arbitrary. "I have chosen to discuss the role the lion plays in Hemingway's story" does not indicate why that subject is significant for the story or for the reader of the essay. The same sort of problem often occurs when reference is made to the essay itself: "This essay will deal with the role the lion plays . . ."

An essay presents the results of your efforts to understand a work of literature, not the process you went through to reach that understanding. It may have taken you three re-readings, a sleepless night, a number of questions and notes that led nowhere, and savage caricatures of your instructor to finally reach a coherent interpretation that seems right to you. This process is very important, but you probably should not include the account of it in your paper. In a personal

essay you might write "When I first read this story, I was confused by all the references to animals. After I re-read it, I discovered . . ." However, in more formal, academic writing, you should probably avoid such a personal tone. You can acknowledge the confusion many readers feel and at the same time focus the essay more clearly by writing, "The story's references to animals may perplex many readers. But as the story develops, these references form a significant pattern."

Interpreting a Text

It is understandable that when we are faced with a complex and baffling work of literature—and when we know the work has been created by a particular person—we have an urge to know what the author really meant. But we usually know very little, if anything, about the lives and aesthetic ideals of the authors whose works we read, so the author's intentions simply cannot be a part of many of our experiences with literature. And there are problems even when we do have a clear statement of the author's intention or enough biographical information to make convincing speculations about probable motives.

Works of literature often seem to suggest multiple patterns of significance rather than a single meaning that is easily condensed into a direct statement. So any paraphrase of the work's meaning, even the author's own paraphrase, may be limited and imperfect. And since creation in any art form involves unconscious as well as conscious motives, the author's conscious intention is not necessarily a complete or, in some cases, even an accurate guide to the work's significance. For these reasons, an interpretive essay of this kind must deal primarily with the work itself and the cultural conditions it refers to. If the work is coherent and carefully formed, it will usually reveal its significance through its structure and language. Information about the author may supplement this primary source of meaning, but it is not ordinarily the key to meaning.

Most literature doesn't represent an author's life directly. It is often a form of pretending, like children's games or our own fantasy life. The urge to write may spring from a desire to explore experiences and emotions radically different from the author's personal experiences. (The authors of crime novels are not usually murderers.) So it is best to refer to the person who narrates the poem or story as the "narrator" or the "speaker" rather than the "author" unless you have some very definite knowledge that the author and the speaker are the same.

Although we usually experience literature as a direct flow of perception from the first word to the last, it is not usually a good idea to follow this sequence in your essay. For one thing, our experience of literature often includes re-reading, pausing to reflect (re-thinking), noticing patterns of action and imagery as we read, and so forth. We don't, in fact, always read the words in a simple, unbroken sequence. More importantly, following this sequence of "events" in a poem, story, or play is almost never the most concise, clearest, or most interesting way to present your interpretations. If, for instance, you are describing ironic effects in Connell's story "The Most Dangerous Game," your best example may occur in the last few paragraphs of the story. This one example may make your point far more effectively than a lengthy discussion of examples of irony beginning with the first one that happens to appear in the story and continuing with the second, the third, and so forth. Again, an essay is an attempt to put a portion of a work

of literature into some coherent pattern of meaning (an interpretation), not a record of the process of your own personal reading.

As with any essay, a literature essay should have its own logical, coherent, progressive structure of argument. The essay should announce its main subject and the thesis you intend to develop in a clear and interesting way. The main idea in each paragraph should follow logically from the preceding paragraph's main idea and should lead logically to the next paragraph. Transition words and phrases should make this logical progression clear to the reader. For example, the idea that Hamlet is confused might lead to the idea that this confusion is really the result of two conflicting urges: to reveal the truth and to conceal the truth. That idea might lead in turn to the argument that he unconsciously resists the story of his father's death because it suggests such horrible things about the nature of the world. If your ideas do not form a logical order, the essay needs reorganization before you begin the final draft. You do not have to write an outline before your rough draft, but you should take a few minutes after you have written a rough draft to jot down the sequence of main ideas in your essay.

An essay's introduction should arouse the reader's interest and sharply define the specific issues the essay will deal with. The introduction provides the writer's contract with the reader; it says, in effect, "This is what you can expect from this essay." Be careful in your introduction to avoid vagueness or over-abstract generalities: "This story deals with the problems of human civilization." Introductory statements should be comprehensive but also concise, specific, and lively: "By the end of the story, Rainsford becomes another Zergoff, another civilized murderer. He has adopted his adversary's brutal attitudes so easily that we are led to question civilization's claim to control human aggression."

The conclusion should return in some way to the main point of the essay. Yet a simple restatement often seems pat, schematic, or simply boring. Try to place the main issues in a different perspective or give them a different emphasis or even show how they might lead to further inquiry. For example, if you had argued the thesis suggested above, you might conclude this way: "Civilization's claim to control aggressive impulses seems to break down very easily in this test case, but we should remember that Rainsford was already a hunter before he came to the island. Although his example offers a warning, it may be an extreme rather than a typical example of human aggression." Or you could suggest that the story's suspenseful method of narration resists the reader's urge to derive a simple moral from the story, however important the moral dimension of the story may be.

Sentence style should generally follow standard usage. Careful proofreading can make a substantial difference in the impact you make and in the basic clarity of your presentation. Every error distracts the reader from the persuasive argument you are trying to make. Reading the essay aloud will help you spot awkward or nonstandard phrases, typographical errors, etc. Although conversational speech patterns often need to be reshaped before they can be used in formal writing, they are a better standard to follow than the awkward and abstract formalisms that dominate much writing.