



APSU Writing Center

Literature Essays

Writing Literature Essays

- Writing about literary works is more than retelling or summarizing the story, providing a plot summary, or interpreting the plot. Professors want students to read the story, analyze the text, and provide some perspective in thinking.
- When writing about a piece of literature, do not retell the story. Assume the reader is already familiar with the literary work and focus on the main idea, or the thesis, for the essay.
- Since reading literature is individually driven, do not worry about whether analytical ideas or perceptions are totally right or wrong. Unless the author's intent for writing is known, the interpretation of the work is open.
- The verb tense of English-literature papers is always in the present tense. This tense shows the literary work is alive and ongoing.
- Writing about literature involves critical thinking or deep analysis of the text. While analyzing, concentrate on a narrowed aspect of the literary text, such as characterization, theme, symbol, imagery, setting, literary style, etc. In addition, the analysis needs to include its significance to the overall work.
- The essay's title should be creative and fit the body of the essay. It should never be the title of the literary work since this borrowing of someone else's title is considered plagiarism.
- The introductory paragraph should providing adequate background of the literary work as needed. Write in a style that will interest the reader, but avoid the informal style of writing. The introduction should identify the complete title of the work (short stories and poems in quotation marks; plays and novels are italicized) and the author's complete name. Thereafter, the author is referred to by last name. The introduction should contain a very brief (no more than three or four sentences) plot summary and, of course, the thesis statement. The thesis statement must make an arguable point, not simply a statement of fact.
- Each body paragraph needs a specific topic sentence that directly relates to one of the main points that is identified in the thesis statement. Ensure all information in *that* paragraph connects directly with that topic sentence and your thesis and stays on topic.
- To provide evidence as proof of main points, use the text for support. Paraphrase or directly quote from the primary text in each body paragraph where needed. Use the text as support and directly quote to validate main points, as opposed to using quotes to story tell.



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- When directly quoting, always lead into the quote with a signal phrase. Avoid beginning and ending paragraphs with quotes. Quotes should never sit alone in a sentence without some sort of introduction, or stand alone in a paragraph without some associated analysis. The process of quoting is as follows:
 - state your point
 - use the quote as evidence
 - then explain how the quote proves your statement
- The primary focus of the paragraph, and entire essay in general, is your critical thinking and analysis, not the story or direct quotes.
- Cite all referenced material according to the style of formatting the assignment requires. English literature papers are usually formatted in MLA style.
- The closing paragraph should *reiterate* the thesis statement, summarize the key points of the essay, and reveal the significance of your analytical ideas. It should not repeat the thesis or the topic sentences or retell the contents of the body of the essay, which causes redundancy. Avoid introducing new ideas and the use of direct quotes. In addition, avoid expressions like “In conclusion,” “In summary,” and “To conclude” at the beginning of the paragraph. If the essay has been effectively written, the reader should readily grasp the change in tempo to your writing and determine you are ending your essay without having to announce the impending conclusion.