

Writing about Literature

Writing about literary texts involves engaging in a process of analysis and response by studying how certain aspects of a text (or texts) work to convey some sort of meaning. To do so, you may consider such aspects of the text as symbolism, language, characterization, setting, etc.; contextual information about the author's life or the world he/she lived in; and/or a theoretical framework (i.e. Feminism, Marxism, Post-Colonialism, etc.) to come to some sort of understanding. Based on your study of the text, you develop a main point (or thesis statement) about the text(s) in terms of any of the above aspects. **All writing assignments for English classes are formatted in MLA style, unless otherwise noted by your professor.** This handout follows the specifications of the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers (9th ed)*.

STYLE and FORMATTING

- * **VERB TENSE:** Always write in the **present tense** when discussing texts, even those that were written hundreds of years ago. Example, "The ghost in *Hamlet* is more evil than benevolent because its actions suggest malicious intent..."
- * **POINT-OF-VIEW:** Write from an **objective, third-person point-of-view**. For example, instead of saying "I think that the narrator is unreliable because..." try "The narrator is unreliable because..." Depending on your professor's preference, you may use "I" sparingly to assert your ideas about the text, but the essay should generally be written without "I." Example: When Frost asserts that the "land was ours," I contend that he forgets the Native American population.
- * **AUTHOR'S NAME:** When mentioning **an author's name** (both the authors of your primary sources and secondary sources) for the first time in your paper use his/her full name. Use only the last name each subsequent time.
- * **TITLES:** **Titles of poems, essays, articles, and short stories** should be in "quotation marks."
Titles of books, film, journals, and drama should be *italicized*.

CONTENT

- * **SUMMARY VS. ANALYSIS:** **Avoid extensive plot summary.** You have to assume your readers have already read the work if they are reading an analysis of it. Your job is to analyze the text using summary only to set up a certain point you are making. **Analysis** involves interpreting the text, while **summary** is just a condensed version of what happens in the text. See the examples below of plot summary and analysis.

PLOT SUMMARY: In Tennessee Williams' play, *The Glass Menagerie*, the Wingfields struggle to keep their bearings in 1930's St. Louis after the family patriarch suddenly deserts them. Amanda, a former Southern Belle, lives with her two grown children, Tom and Laura. Amanda is devoted to finding her daughter a husband and to reminiscing about her past. Laura is emotionally vulnerable, hindered by her debilitating shyness and impaired leg. She spends her days with her little glass animals and playing the Victrola. Tom, meanwhile, works a job at the same factory where his father worked, and is desperate to move out of town and do something important with his life. Amanda and Tom's relationship is contentious, but she eventually persuades him to bring a friend from work, Jim, home to meet Laura. When Jim arrives, Laura is mortified and retreats away from her guest because he is the boy she had a crush on in high school. Eventually, Laura and Jim are alone together, and Laura slowly opens up to Jim about her memories of him, her glass animals, and her insecurities. They dance and Jim kisses Laura, but immediately admits that he is engaged. Laura is devastated as Jim leaves. Amanda and Tom are then shocked to learn the news about Jim; Amanda accuses Tom of knowing all along Jim was engaged. The two argue and Tom leaves the Wingfield home. In an epilogue, he confesses to the audience that he left home and traveled far from home, but he could not forget Laura, no matter how far he traveled.

ANALYSIS: *The Glass Menagerie* is a play about how living in a state of fantasy can cause a person to be emotionally and socially stunted. Amanda is forever stuck in the past, frequently telling her children about her seventeen “gentlemen callers” back when she was young, and how “sometimes there weren’t chairs enough to accommodate them all” (1. 84-86). This tendency prevents her from acknowledging the pain caused by her husband leaving her and her own daughter’s emotional turmoil. Laura is living a life defined solely by fear and her little glass animals. She is not able to move forward in her life and uses her glass menagerie as an excuse, telling Jim that her “glass collection takes up a good deal of time. Glass is something you have to take good care of” (7. 321-323). Tom, meanwhile, is obsessed with getting away from his job and family, constantly planning for what he’s going to do and hoping for anything to get him “out of this 2 by 4 situation” (4. 34-35). However, when he actually leaves, he abandons Laura and is overcome by guilt at the end of the play. All three characters are destined to live lives that are incomplete because they cannot accept the reality of their situations, all adhering to Amanda’s accusation of Tom at the end of the play: “You live in a dream; you manufacture illusions!” (7. 716-717).

- * **THESIS STATEMENT:** A thesis statement about a literary text (or texts) should be a detailed and specific sentence that conveys the main point about the text(s) you are trying to prove in your paper.
 - **AVOID**
 - **Anne Sexton’s poem “Housewife” is about what it’s like to be housewife.**
 - This statement is not an argument. It is simply telling what the poem is about—most people would generally agree with this statement, so it is not a strong thesis.
 - ***Pride and Prejudice* is a well-rewritten novel that keeps the reader interested.**
 - This statement is vague and only indicates the likability of the novel. It does not reveal any close interpretation of the text.
 - **DO THIS**
 - **In Anne Sexton’s poem “Housewife,” the figure of the house is used as a metaphor for the protective yet stifling lifestyle a housewife endures.**
 - This statement presents a point-of-view about the text that is specific and debatable. It conveys that the writer is thinking critically about how some aspect of the text works (in this case, the role of the *house* image).
 - **Jane Austen’s use of 3rd person point-of-view prevents her narrative from falling into a melodramatic tale of romance and personal angst; instead, it enables the reader to focus on the social dynamics and protocol that influenced the young men and women of Regency England.**
 - This statement is detailed, specific, debatable, and presents a perspective about the text that shows analysis of how the text works (in this case, how point-of-view affects meaning).
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- * **NARRATOR VS. AUTHOR:** Keep in mind **the narrator or speaker of a text is not necessarily the writer of the text.** Writers often write literature from perspectives that are not their own or in the voice of another type of person, even if they use 1st person point-of-view. Therefore, do not write “Toni Morrison criticizes the community of Lorain, Ohio...”; instead, write “*The narrator* criticizes the community of Lorain, Ohio...”
- * **TEXTUAL SUPPORT:** Every point you make about the text must be supported with **specific textual evidence**, preferably in the form of direct quotations. Be very specific in explaining how a certain line or sentence reflects the point you are trying to make. [See the next page for examples]

○ **AVOID:**

Esperanza's frustration with growing up is present when she expresses the following: "I looked at my feet in their white socks and ugly round shoes. They seemed far away. They didn't seem to be my feet anymore. And the garden that had been such a good place to play didn't seem mine either" (98). Another point about the novel is that....

In the above example, the writer did not set up the quoted passage or explain its significance and how it illustrates his/her point. The writer needed to explain what it is about that section that shows the narrator's frustration. Certain words? Specific punctuation? A powerful image?

○ **DO THIS:**

Esperanza's frustration with growing up is present during the chapter titled "Monkey Garden" when she is left alone after trying to stop a flirtatious encounter between a group of boys and her friend Sally. She runs away and hides, and expresses the following: "I looked at my feet in their white socks and ugly round shoes. They seemed far away. They didn't seem to be my feet anymore. And the garden that had been such a good place to play didn't seem mine either" (Cisneros 98). Esperanza's reaction to her shoes echoes her sense of confusion about growing up. She is not comfortable with the changes she witnesses in those around her and in herself. She can no longer be certain that she knows who she is and what she wants in this new world.

The scene is set for the reader and the passage is explained in reference to the point the writer is trying to make.

(from Cisneros, Sandra. *The House on Mango Street*. New York, Vintage Books, 1984. Print.)

Referencing Literature within an MLA Style Paper

GENERAL INFORMATION: No matter the type of text you work with, when referring to specific parts of the text you must indicate an **author** (or director for a film) and **page number, line number, act, scene, etc.** to help your reader locate that section of text if needed. This information also shows that you have investigated the text closely, giving you credibility as a writer. There are two basic ways to include this information:

1. Include the author's name and page number (or line number, act, etc.) in a parenthetical citation following the section of the text referred to.
 - a. The vivid imagery of the poem is best seen when the narrator reflects on how "Young as she is, the stuff / Of her life is a great cargo, and some of it heavy: / I wish her a lucky passage" (Wilbur 7-9).
2. Include the author's name in the text leading up to the quote or passage referred to and the page number (or line number, act, etc.) in parentheses following the section of text worked with.
 - a. Wilbur's descriptive style is best seen when his narrator reflects on how "Young as she is, the stuff / Of her life is a great cargo, and some of it heavy: / I wish her a lucky passage" (7-9).

[From "The Writer" by Richard Wilbur]

See the following pages for more information on referencing different genres within your paper.

POETRY

- * **THREE LINES OR FEWER OF POETRY:** Separate each line with a / and include the line numbers (and author's last name if necessary) in a parenthetical citation at the end of the poetic lines. Retain the exact same punctuation, spelling, and capitalization. Use quotation marks to set the boundaries for the beginning and end of the poetic lines.

Examples:

One line, or part of a line: [from "That Dog of Art" by Denise Levertov]

The image of having "daisies for eyes" (Levertov 1) conveys the creative and sometimes fanciful visions of life that poets convey through their poetry.

Two-Three lines: [from "Birches" by Robert Frost]

He is described as "Some boy too far from town to learn baseball, / Whose only play was what he found himself, / Summer or winter, and could play alone" (Frost 25-27).

FOUR OR MORE LINES: block the poetry off from the rest of your text. Indent each line ten spaces (1") from the left margin, double-spacing between each line. If your sentence that introduces this block of poetry does not flow smoothly with the lines, place a colon [:] following the sentence. No quotation marks are used when poetry is blocked off. The line numbers are placed in a parenthetical citation immediately following the last word (or end punctuation) of the poem.

Example: [from "Burning the Christmas Greens" by William Carlos Williams]

However, Williams evokes a sense of sadness with the lines that tell of retrieving branches:

to fill our need, and over

doorways, about paper Christmas

bells covered with tinfoil

and fastened by red ribbons. (18-23)

- * **OMITTING WORDS FROM A POEM:** If you need to omit text from a quoted poem, use 3 elliptical points to indicate the omission. If you need to omit an entire line of poetry, use a line of ellipses similar to the length of a line in the poem.

Example: [From "My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun" by William Shakespeare]

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;

Coral is far more red . . . ;

.....

If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head. (Shakespeare 1-2, 4)

Writing about Prose

- * **QUOTE IS FOUR TYPED LINES OR FEWER:** signify using quotation marks. The quote should be immediately followed by the author's last name and page number in a parenthetical citation before the end punctuation, or just the page number if the author's name was already mentioned in the sentence. Keep the same capitalization present in the original text when quoting from it.

Example: [from Celia Thaxter's "Child-life at the Isles of Shoals"]

This almost mystical attachment is again expressed when Thaxter describes getting up at sunrise and noting how an "infinite variety of beauty always awaited me, and filled me with an absorbing, unreasoning joy such as makes the song-sparrow sing,— a sense of perfect bliss" (179).

- * **QUOTE IS LONGER THAN FOUR TYPED LINES:** these quotes need to be blocked off from the rest of your text. Begin a new line, indenting 10 spaces (1") for all lines of the quote. The quote should still be double-spaced, but have no quotation marks. If your sentence that introduces this block of text does not flow smoothly into it, place a colon [:] following the sentence. The page numbers the quote can be found on should immediately follow the last sentence, after any ending punctuation. Use this type of quotation sparingly!

Example:

In a 1786 letter to George Blood, brother of Wollstonecraft's childhood friend Fanny, she expressed the mental turmoil she was suffering from at the time:

I am indeed very unwell, a kind of melancholy langour consumes me...my nerves have been so much injured I am afraid I shall never be tolerably well—These disorders are particularly distressing as they seem intirely to arise from the mind—and that an exertion of the reasoning faculties would banish them and bring it to a proper tone—but slackened nerves are not to be braced by arguments physical as well as mental causes have contributed to reduce me to my present weak state. (qtd. in Conger 14)

(Your next sentence would start flush against the left margin, unless it was a new paragraph).

- * **OMITTING TEXT FROM A QUOTE:** if a section of a quote is irrelevant to your point, signal an omission using 3 elliptical points. If you need to omit an entire sentence from a quoted passage, use 4 elliptical points.

Example: [from Celia Thaxter's "Among the Isles of Shoals"]

The sublime first presents itself as Thaxter describes how "Nobody hears of people dying of home-sickness for New York, or Albany, or Maine, or California...but to wild and lonely spots like these isles humanity clings with the intense and abiding affection" (160).

Writing about Drama/Film

For quoting two or more lines of dialogue from a play or film, set the lines off from the rest of the text. Indent 10 spaces (1") and write the first character's name in all caps, followed by a period. For each subsequent line of dialogue spoken by the same person at the same time, indent it ¼ inch further in the blocked off section (about 5 spaces). Double-space throughout. In parentheses following the last line of text, indicate the author and then the act, scene, canto, part, book, and/or line numbers. Generally, you do not use the actual words "act," "scene," etc. in the citations unless the section has a specific name (i.e. books of the Bible). For example, Act Two, Scene Three, lines 34-40, would be represented as (2.3. 34-40). Separate each number with a period.

Example: [from *A Doll's House*]

Nora and Helmer's disagreement about the role of men and women is clearly seen through their argument about Nora's decision at the end of the play:

NORA. To-morrow I shall go home—I mean, to my old home. It will be easiest for me
to find something to do there.

HELMER. You blind, foolish woman!

NORA. I must try and get some sense, Torvald!

HELMER. To desert your home, your husband and your children! And you don't
consider what people will say! (Ibsen 3.763-77)

DRAMA IN VERSE FORM (i.e. Shakespeare's plays): use the rules above for dialogue. However, when quoting 3 or fewer lines from a monologue, soliloquy, or another section of text spoken by one character, separate the lines using forward slashes, as you would for separating lines of poetry.

Example:

Puck ends *A Midsummer Night's Dream* with "So, good night unto you all. / Give me your hands, if we be friends, / And Robin shall restore amends" (5.1. 431-433).

QUOTING MORE THAN THREE LINES OF A VERSE PLAY: set the passage off from the rest of the text as you would for 4 or more lines of a section of a poem (see pg. 3).

For information on setting up a **Works Cited page**, see the Writing Center's Guide to MLA Format, found at the Academic Support Center or online at www.strose.edu/writingcenter.

For more information on **MLA format**, please see the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* (9th ed). New York: Modern Language Association of America, 2021.

More citation information can be found at Purdue Owl Online Website's MLA section, https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/purdue_owl.html

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