

WRITING ESSAYS ON FICTION

No matter what approach you take in any of the kinds of essays discussed below, always keep in mind: one interpretation or approach to a text doesn't exclude others; two different interpretations or approaches can even be part of a single, coherent essay.

ESSAYS ABOUT PLOT

Though a basic understanding of how plot works is crucial to the analysis of literary texts and though student writers need to learn to use facts about plot in making arguments about literature, you rarely should write essays solely on plot.

- One truly workable plot-related essay assignment involves focusing on a particular event or moment in the plot of a story and to write an essay in which you argue that this moment or event is pivotal, showing how this moment foregrounds, complicates, and/or resolves a central (thematic) conflict in the text (which means showing why and how a particular event is key to the "rising action" or constitutes a "turning point" or "climax").
- When formulating thesis statements that focus on the significance of an event or moment in the plot of a story, you want to avoid making claims about how events make a story more "interesting" or "engaging," how they make the reader more "curious," or how they heighten suspense. Such claims are usually true enough and can often be insightful, but they aren't the kind of arguable claims that lead to engaged or engaging analytical essays.

PLOT-FOCUSED WRITING EXERCISES

Summarizing the Plot

- Even if you are not writing an essay that analyzes the plot of a fictional text per se, it is still useful to write a short plot summary in preparation for writing an essay about some other facet of a text. For example, in five sentences or fewer, describe the plot of your chosen text and try to make the story vivid and interesting to your own reader, to *show* as well as tell that reader what the story is all about.
- This exercise can be an important part of your drafting process, especially in helping you draw out what you find most interesting in the text; even the most basic and seemingly objective descriptions or summaries of a plot almost necessarily begin to imply a certain interpretation of, or argument about, a story, if only by virtue of including some things and excluding others. As a result, writing and comparing plot summaries can become a good technique with which you can generate topics and theses for essays, to figure out what your individual "angles" on a particular text are.
- You may also begin your essay by using a very short plot summary in your introduction, as a way to give, or at least remind readers of, the information about a story that someone needs to understand an argument about it and as a way to "build up to" the thesis.
- Finally, when determining how to use plot summaries in argumentative essays, it's useful to think about your audience and the amount and kinds of information you should feel called upon to provide in your essay. While you might assume that your teacher is your only reader and that you can, therefore, assume intimate knowledge of the texts you're writing about, essays read better if they are written to be intelligible to a wider audience, including readers who haven't read the text in question. It's helpful to have a clear image of your reader; perhaps, for example, you might envision your reader as a classmate or roommate

who is familiar with, and interested in, literary analysis but who hasn't read this particular text (or at least hasn't read it as recently or as closely as you have).

Summarizing the Plot in Terms of a Key Event or Moment

- Write a short plot summary that places particular emphasis on the event or moment on which you will focus in your essay; this will help you begin to formulate an argument about why that event or moment is pivotal, which you will need to make explicit in your essay.

Comparing Chronological Order and Actual Plot Structure

- If your essay focuses wholly or in part on the author's timing of events in the narrative, then it's also useful to write a summary that reorganizes those events into chronological order (especially if you are working with a text that has a nonlinear structure). Then, generate ideas about the effects of the differences between this chronological ordering and the order in which events are narrated in the story.

Recording and Commenting on Readerly Expectations

- Another helpful plot-related exercise is to keep records of the expectations that develop during your reading of a story. This can help you think about the overall significance of the ways the story raises and then defies particular expectations.

ESSAYS ABOUT NARRATION AND POINT OF VIEW

Narration and point of view, like plot, are less often the focus of student essays on literature than they are a component of such essays. With some work and thought, however, a full-length essay could focus on questions about how a particular point of view and/or shifts between different points of view contribute to the meaning of a particular text.

- Students are usually very good at seeing how narration and point of view affect the reader's sympathy for, and knowledge of, particular characters, guiding the reader to take certain stances in regard to those characters. However, this can lead to a simplistic or limited analysis; instead you might write about the ways in which narration and point of view affect the text's portrayal of particular issues.

POINT-OF-VIEW-FOCUSED WRITING EXERCISES

Rewriting Texts from Different Points of View

- Rewriting all or a selected portion of a given text from a different point of view (or two) is a good exercise for generating discussion about a particular text and/or about point of view in general. Choose a particular section of the text and rewrite this with a particular point of view, and then write a paragraph about what's lost or at least fundamentally changed by altering the point of view. One might, for example, rewrite the first few paragraphs of "The Cask of Amontillado" from a third-person omniscient point of view and the end or middle of the story from a first-person perspective.

Recording and Analyzing Readerly Expectations in Light of Point of View

- Another good point-of-view exercise is a version of the expectations exercise when summarizing plots; in other words, keep exactly the same kind of record of expectations, but this time pay special attention to the way in which point of view and/or particular shifts in point of view affect those expectations.

ESSAYS ABOUT CHARACTER

The following are different types of essays on character that students most often produce:

- Essays showing how a particular character embodies a particular worldview or value system and/or showing how and why a character suffers a particular problem or dilemma (because of his or her worldview or value system).
 - Though being able to argue that a character embodies a particular worldview is crucial to almost any kind of literary essay, this sometimes leads to rather flat essays. One way to enliven and deepen such essays is to focus on what a (shallow) reader might expect such a character to represent and how that character defies such readerly expectations or interpretations. Such an essay might thus be governed by a thesis that goes something like “While character X seems to be a Y, he or she is really a Z.”
- Essays showing how and why a particular character *or* our vision of that character (and/or his or her worldview or values) develops or changes over the course of a narrative.
 - In the drafting process, write an outline that articulates claims about each of the stages a character or our perception of that character goes through—for example, “At the beginning of the story, character X is (or seems to be) a Y”; “When A happens, character X begins to see Z” (or, “When A happens, we, as readers, begin to see Z about character X”); “By the end of the story, character X has become (or seems to be) a D.” Doing so can help you avoid letting the body of your essay devolve into plot summaries and, again, can help you to focus on the attitudes an author embodies in a character rather than on the character per se.
- Another approach is to show exactly why and how a seemingly minor character, a character who isn’t obviously either a protagonist or an antagonist or foil, plays a crucial role in a given text. (This is a version of the kind of essay that argues “this seemingly unimportant thing is really central.”)

HELPFUL TIP

One of the key problems students face in writing about character is the tendency to treat characters as individual people rather than as embodiments of certain worldviews, values, attitudes, ways of being, or whatever vocabulary you choose to use. Another, perhaps less reductive way to phrase this would be to say that characters in fiction function both as individuals and as representatives of certain worldviews just as a given object in a fictional text can be simultaneously that object and a symbol for something else. With character, as with other fictional elements, in other words, we need to move back and forth between the concrete and the abstract, the specific and the general.

CHARACTER-FOCUSED WRITING EXERCISES

- There are many different kinds of evidence a writer can use to support a particular interpretation of a character; here’s a list of several types of evidence, which you might use to identify at least one piece of evidence of each type with which you might support a particular claim about a character:
 - Something the character says or thinks
 - Something the character does

- Something another character or the narrator says about the character
- Something the character wears, owns, and so on
- Next, think about counterevidence and/or counterarguments, which helps produce much more sophisticated essays. Follow up your list of different kinds of supporting evidence with (1) a list of pieces of evidence that undermine (or might seem to undermine) the claim about the character and (2) a paragraph that either shows how and why this piece of evidence doesn't necessarily contradict the claim, or, 3) shows how this piece of evidence may require readers to broaden or complicate their interpretation of the character.
- Finally, a less evidence-oriented extension of this exercise would be to articulate the most powerful counterarguments you can imagine, as if, for example, you were a lawyer preparing for court. Remember, facts don't support any argument unless or until you infer something from them, and inferences make sense only if you show the facts they derive from. (In other words, we should use the word *evidence* to refer only to facts plus inferences, not to facts alone.)

ESSAYS ABOUT SYMBOLS

Writing about symbols can be challenging, simply because if one reads literary texts actively, anything and everything can be a symbol in the sense that it has both literal and figurative significance. Nonetheless, students can be successful focusing on this concept when writing essays that analyze the symbolism in a particular text, whether by tracing the changing or possible meanings of a single, particular symbol or by analyzing how various symbols work together. These are the two symbol-focused essay types that students typically produce.

HELPFUL TIPS

- The most common symbol-related writing problem is the tendency to construct essays that don't really come together as unified arguments but instead devolve into lists of symbols or of the various occurrences of a single symbol. Sometimes, the student writer even has trouble making inferences along the way; more often, particular inferences are there, and the problem is that there aren't really any big ideas toward which those inferences lead or through which the writer can link particular inferences. The challenge, then, is to tie together your various observations, weaving them into a single argument rather than allowing them to remain a list of "cool observations."
- One technique that helps students avoid the "list" problem is to avoid constructing a thesis statement that only identifies the symbol, such as: "In 'The Yellow Wallpaper,' the wallpaper is an important symbol." It is much easier to create substantive and coherent arguments if you create thesis statements that are themselves more substantive, indicating not just what the symbols are or saying something about the symbols being "important" or "interesting" but also indicating why or to what end the author uses the symbols and what the author communicates through them. Again, a kind of thesis formula might read: "The author uses X as a symbol to explore or illustrate or ask Y."
- Finally, students tend to write better, more interesting symbol-focused essays when they write about stories that are less obviously or relentlessly symbolic, allegorical, or mythic. So if you want to write a paper focusing on symbols then you might choose a more obvious story to generate discussion about symbolism.

SYMBOL-FOCUSED WRITING EXERCISE

Symbol Hunting and Gathering

- Start by reading the story and simply identify everything in it that might function as a symbol, underlining each occurrence of each symbol. You do not need to focus on a thing literally present in the text but on a recurring metaphor, and you should look for these kinds of symbols as well as the more obvious kinds. (In fact, read the story at least twice, trying to find new symbols each time you read it.)
- If you decide to focus on a single symbol, look over your lists and choose a symbol you want to focus on; choose the one that seems most puzzling to you at first and/or a symbol that you began to see as a symbol only on a second or third reading of the story, rather than the one that you think you “got” right away. Then start analyzing the symbol by doing one of two things, depending on which seems to best fit the story and its symbolism:
 - The first is to break the story down into at least three stages that correspond roughly with the beginning, middle, and end; to make clear statements, like topic sentences, about what they infer from or about the symbol’s meaning and significance at each of these stages; and then to begin crafting a thesis statement that captures the overall significance of the symbol and serves as a kind of “umbrella” for your various inferences.
 - The second is to come up with a series of possible claims, like topic sentences, about just what this symbol might symbolize and to identify the evidence from the story that supports each claim. Essentially, come up with three or four different answers to the question “What might this thing symbolize?”—but you should also consider the effects of ambiguity itself, of the fact that the story allows for several answers.
 - By deciding which of these two approaches best fits the particular text you’re working on, you should be thinking about the way in which certain texts—such as “The Thing in the Forest”—depend on ambiguous, nonallegorical symbols whose figurative significance cannot be easily paraphrased or pinned down. As a result, such texts demand the second approach rather than the first.
- You might also focus on multiple symbols; look at your list and choose the three or four most important, yet least obvious, symbols. Try to generate claims about how each of these symbols works in the story, collecting evidence to support each, and then develop claims about how the symbols work together—about how a given symbol adds to, or complicates, the meaning of another, and so on. Here, you should begin thinking about how you will organize the discussion of each symbol in your essay, since this organization needs to be logical and climactic; it shouldn’t be possible to simply lift out a section of the essay and move it somewhere else. At this point, you need to begin asking: What order will I discuss the symbols in, and why does this order work the best and seem the most logical and climactic? The answer usually has to do with levels of obviousness or complexity and/or the extent to which the meanings of a given symbol depend on other symbols, and so forth.

ESSAYS ABOUT SETTING

Writing about “Symbol” and “Setting” works well in conjunction, precisely because the two elements often, though obviously not always, become intertwined; both facets of the setting (furniture or buildings, for example) and settings themselves may function, in essence, as

symbols. Or, you might write effectively about setting when you analyze it in relation to character, or as a part of, characterization; in terms of its role in creating conflicts within or between characters (or forcing such conflicts into the open); and/or as if it were itself a character of sorts within a given story. Analyzing setting in relation to character in one of these ways helps ensure that your essay has real points (and aren't just random observations about setting). Students too often ignore the way in which setting is as much about time and history as it is about particular places. In this way, you can enrich your analysis by also making connections between setting and cultural context.

SETTING-FOCUSED WRITING EXERCISE

Answering Setting-Focused Questions and Generating Setting-Focused Theses

- To write the kind of essay described above, you should start by rereading the story you're going to write about, paying special attention to descriptions of setting and/or characters' remarks or thoughts about a particular setting. Then consider the following questions about the way setting operates in the story, making notes both about your answers and about the evidence from the story you would use to support those answers:
 - What qualities are associated with the setting (or settings) of the story? What's the "character" of the setting?
 - Does the setting serve as a symbol? If so, for what?
 - Does the setting have different meanings for different characters? How do the characters' attitudes toward the setting help characterize each of them and/or inspire or bring into the open the conflict between the characters?
 - Do some or all of the characters' attitudes toward the setting change? If so, what does this change reveal about each character? Does the setting play a role in the character's learning process? If so, how so?
 - Do particular aspects of the setting have specific symbolic significance? If so, what are those aspects, and what is their particular significance?
- Also use these questions to generate thesis statements that suggest how the setting, settings, or some particular aspects thereof do one or more of the following:
 - contribute to the characterization of a particular character or characters;
 - help bring out a conflict within a character or between characters; or
 - help dramatize the change within a character or within the reader's perception of a character over the course of the story.

ESSAYS ABOUT THEME

Students often conflate theme with what we might call a topic or subject, producing theses along the lines of "The theme of 'X' is love or alienation." Such theses often produce boring essays simply because writers fail to discuss what a text says about love or alienation (or whatever the noun of choice is) or even what *love* or *alienation* means. On the other hand, students often go to the opposite extreme, conflating theme with something very like moral, and usually a moral that is little more than a cliché. While such an approach has the advantage of at least forcing them to say something more substantive about what a text means, I find that *substantive* all too often comes to mean *simplistic*.

HELPFUL TIPS

- To help you avoid these trouble spots, stay away from using the word *theme* in your writing. Instead, use words such as *conflict*, *issue*, and/or *question*—producing a thesis such as: “‘The Nightmare’ explores the question of whether there is any such thing as an individual consciousness or point of view.” In other words, thinking of texts in terms of “conflicts” or “questions” rather than “themes” will help you write more complex arguments that allow for the ways in which texts tend to explore problems rather than offer simplistic solutions.
- Students also tend to think of stories as having a single theme and to think that writing about theme requires that they discover and focus solely on that biggest of big ideas. You should instead look for multiple themes or at least multiple ways of articulating the same theme. Again, focus on issues, questions, or conflicts can help in this regard, keeping in mind that stories can explore multiple questions or issues simultaneously. And the emphasis on questions and “exploring” discourages easy answers and premature closure.

THEME-FOCUSED WRITING EXERCISES

Identifying and Complicating “Morals”

- To work from, rather than against, students’ tendency to conflate theme with moral, try to come up with a moral “tag” or cliché—such as “To thine own self be true” or “Appearances can be deceiving”—that to your mind fits a given story. Then, brainstorm how you might lay out an argument to support the case for each, what evidence you would use, and so on. In the process of doing so, you might become dissatisfied with the clichés. If so, then try complicating the clichés, coming up with evidence that refutes them.
- This technique has the added advantage of modeling a certain kind of essay, in which the thesis might be something along the lines of “‘The Nightmare’ examines our belief in the old adage ‘Appearances can be deceiving’,” and which would proceed by showing, first, why the story seems to fall in line with the cliché and then showing how it complicates the idea conveyed in the cliché, perhaps—in the case of “The Nightmare”—by showing how the story reveals the havoc that comes of seeing appearances as *only* deceiving.

Generating Theme-Related Theses

- To avoid some of the problems described above when writing about theme, try to come up with multiple theses (usually three to four), each of which must focus on a distinct issue, question, conflict, or theme. Though not terribly inventive, this and other thesis-generating exercises can be the most productive for student writers. Having to come up with multiple theses simply makes you dig deeper and think about the text and your essay from different angles; often you might discover that the best essay results not from the first thesis you come up with but from the third or fourth.