

## WRITING LITERARY RESEARCH ESSAYS

You should use the MLA Style Resource Guide available from [Owl at Purdue](#) formatting and citation guidelines. There is also a sample essay and works cited page for your reference.

## WRITING TIPS

**Formulating Theses:** Below are four types of theses common to literary-critical or analytical essays, and I give you one or two examples of each type. You should try to craft at least one thesis of each type that you might use as the basis for your essay.

1. As we've seen, one genre of literary essay focuses on character. You could, for example, make an argument about the development of a particular character, or you could make an argument comparing two or more characters and showing how a central conflict in the text is embodied in the differences and direct conflict between those two characters.
  - **Example:** *A. S. Byatt's "The Thing in the Forest" blends elements of both the traditional fairy tale and contemporary realistic fiction to explore the fluid, even arbitrary distinctions between the truth of actual occurrence and the truth of dreams. "There once were two little girls," the story opens, "who saw, or believed they saw, a thing in a forest." The girls are sharply delineated: Penny is tall, thin, and dark and will, as an adult, become a highly educated professional; short, plump, blonde, excitable Primrose will become a storyteller and never really leave the world of childhood behind. At first, then, Byatt seems to present a classic dichotomy between the intellect, as represented by Penny, and the emotions, in the person of Primrose. Byatt undercuts this apparently schematic characterization, though, by thrusting the two into a strange convergence of their destinies. Reality—or is it unreality?—trumps character.*
2. Another genre of literary essay focuses directly on a central theme or conflict. While great essays can be written about theme, don't forget the potential problems with theme-focused essays that we discussed earlier.
  - **Example:** *Kate Chopin's "The Story of an Hour" explores the conflict between a woman's desire to be loved and taken care of by a man and her desire for independence.*
3. Yet another genre of literary essay focuses on posing and exploring possible answers to a difficult question about a literary text. Such a question can focus on a particular action (Why does character X do such and such?), theme (Is the author saying this or this?), character, and so on. As the second example below demonstrates, a question essay can offer an answer or answers to the question and/or explore the effect of ambiguity itself, the significance of the fact that the question *isn't* really answerable. Just remember that even if your essay answers your question, you can argue that this answer is right only if you explore other potential answers along the way.
  - **Example 1:** *A. S. Byatt's "The Thing in the Forest" toys with the seductive conventions of traditional fairy tales: a mansion lit by a full moon, a magical forest haunted by a*

- ghastly monster, two brave little girls who will not disavow what they know they have seen. The story is not a fairy tale, though; “the thing in the forest,” however monstrous, is compellingly real, and the little girls grow into women with psychological depth, women who inhabit the modern world we think we know. What, then, is Byatt’s game here? The story tantalizes us with hints of a conclusive moral, or perhaps a modernist’s ironic dismissal of the very notion of a “moral”—but what are we to make of the bland, unblinking assertion that there are things “more real than we are”?*
- **Example 2:** *“The Thing in the Forest” subverts the reader’s sense of reality with a central image—the monstrous “thing” itself—that is presented in terms so detailed, so concretely plausible, that it all but overwhelms the mundane “real” world in which the story is set, a world anchored in historical fact yet sketched with the broad gestures and simplifications of a fairy tale. What is the nature of truth here—perceived actuality, or a willingness to believe?*
4. Another type of essay, sometimes very similar to type 3, shows why some detail or element in a text that seems insignificant is, in fact, crucial. You might, for example, focus on a seemingly minor character, a word or phrase, a particular action or moment in the text, a detail of setting, and so on.
- **Example 1:** *Throughout A. S. Byatt’s “The Thing in the Forest,” the author playfully evokes the world of familiar fairy tales: a group of schoolgirls is “like a disorderly dwarf regiment,” bewildered children are “like Hansel and Gretel” who soon feel “orphaned,” a character’s blond curls are “goldilocks.” And when an apparently minor character is introduced as “Alys,” we barely have time to catch the allusion before she is dismissed from the action. But is this Alys just an authorial wink? Or does Byatt use her disappearance in the wake of “the thing in the forest” to create a delayed sense of horror?*
  - **Example 2:** *The story takes place during the Blitz—that is, during the German bombardment of British cities early in World War II. The evacuation of children to the countryside is, of course, what brings the two protagonists together, and each girl loses her father to the war. Otherwise, though, the mortal danger the girls had faced at home is barely mentioned and seems far less real to them than the supernatural “thing” of the story’s title. Nevertheless, the war’s vague offstage presence is crucial to the story’s sly exploration of “those very few dreams . . . that have the quality of life itself.”*

**Gathering Evidence:** Once you’ve developed a thesis, the next step is to gather the facts you will use to support and develop that thesis in the body of the essay.

- To prepare for this task, you should read the MLA Style sample essay provided by Owl at Purdue. As you do so, highlight or underline the facts that the writer refers to, whether those facts are taken from the text or are about the text or the author. Which facts are used as evidence? What *kinds* of facts are used as evidence here? What other kinds of facts might you use as evidence in a literary-critical essay? What specific techniques does this writer use to incorporate facts gracefully into the essays?

- Remember, though, facts alone are simply facts; they aren't evidence for anything. To turn a fact into evidence, then, you have to both present the fact itself to readers and tell readers what you infer from the fact, showing them how and why it is evidence for your idea. Usually, every paragraph in the body of an essay should begin by articulating a particular idea, and everything within the paragraph should be either an inference or a fact that contributes directly to supporting and developing that idea.
- Look at the student essay again, and this time, mark the ideas and the inferences. What specific techniques does the writer use to turn facts into evidence for particular ideas, to link facts directly to inferences? Are there moments in the essay when the use of evidence seems weak? Is it because there aren't enough facts? because there aren't enough inferences? because the two aren't linked clearly or aren't in the right order? (Remember, readers usually prefer to see the inference before the supporting facts.)
- Now that you've closely examined the way another student writer presents facts and turns them into evidence, it's time to begin the work of gathering facts for your own essay. Doing so will require that you decide on your thesis. Remembering what we discussed about the function of literary-critical essays (for authors and for readers), which of the theses you formulated seems to promise the most interesting and effective essay both for you and for your readers?
- After you've decided on a thesis, type this out; then look back over your primary text or novel with that thesis in mind. Underneath your thesis, make a list of the facts from and about the text that you think will be most necessary to supporting and developing that thesis. This list should include at least one or two passages from the story. Beside each fact (including passages), brainstorm about it, paying attention to diction, syntax, and so on, and about the ways you might use it in your essay. What idea might this fact be good evidence for? What are the inferences that make it evidence?

**Identifying Counterevidence and Imagining Counterarguments:** Since you don't want to oversimplify the literary text to make your argument persuasive, or to undermine your credibility, you need to consider possible objections, counterarguments, alternative interpretations, etc.

- One way to do so is to look for evidence that seems to contradict or at least complicate your initial thesis. Come up with one or two facts from your story that might seem to contradict your thesis, that suggest a different answer to your question, and so on. Comment briefly on how you might use the fact or facts as evidence in your essay:
  - How might you interpret this fact in a way that shows that it does not, ultimately, contradict your thesis? Conversely, how might you use this fact to build on and complicate your argument?
- Another way to accomplish the same goal is to imagine you are a defense attorney preparing for an upcoming trial in which you will have to persuade a jury to accept your interpretation of a story. To prepare your case effectively, you're going to have to imagine the counterarguments that the prosecutor might come up with to undermine your argument. What's the prosecutor's most powerful argument? How will you defend your argument against that possible counterargument in your essay? If the counterargument is more persuasive than your own argument, how does your argument need to change?

## **ESSAYS ABOUT CULTURAL AND CRITICAL CONTEXTS**

- One challenge students face in writing essays that refer to critical and/or cultural contexts (or research essays of any sort, for that matter) is the tendency to let sources dominate the essay and drown the students' ideas out. This problem tends to take one of two forms: First, an essay simply reiterates the argument of a source; second, an essay spends all its time arguing with a source or sources yet fails to provide an alternative interpretation of the text.
- Think back to the reading response essays in which you had to have your own argument to make about the text without relying on secondary sources—this will help you remember the skills you developed in order to rely upon your own argument and interpretation. Even in a research essay, sources always come second, contributing to your arguments rather than overtaking them. Also remember that even arguments with sources can be substantiated only by interpretation of evidence from the text.

## **CRITICAL/CULTURAL-CONTEXT-FOCUSED WRITING EXERCISES**

To use sources effectively in their own writing, students must understand the uses of sources, understand the sources they plan to use, and have their own independent arguments about the text in question. Do the exercises here to help ensure that you master each of these steps.

### ***Identifying the Functions and Uses of Sources***

When evaluating secondary sources, mark the places where each writer mentions source material of any kind. Then, when you've finished, go back and look at your markings, working to generate answers to the following questions:

- Which of these sources are primary? Which of these sources are secondary? To what extent are the two kinds of source materials different, and to what extent is the difference due to the way the writer uses the materials?
- What function does each reference to a source serve in the essay? Why does the writer refer to each source? What precise contribution does it make? Are there places where the purpose of source material isn't clear? Where source material doesn't make much of a contribution?
- What specific techniques does the writer use to incorporate primary source material effectively? When and why, for example, does the writer quote from the sources? When and why does the writer paraphrase? How does the writer introduce sources?
- Does source material ever get in the way of, rather than contribute to, the argument? If so, why and how does it interfere? What might this writer have done differently?
- How does the writer introduce source material? What does the writer tell you about each source? Are there places where the writer doesn't give you enough or gives you too much information about a source?

### ***Summarizing Critical Conversations***

- Using source material requires that you understand and effectively describe both individual arguments and the relationships among different arguments, but these tasks often prove difficult. To help with this, you should write very short summaries (say, three sentences long) of each source's argument and then to write a "synthetic summary," which brings those arguments together in two or so paragraphs, showing how they fit together as parts of one argumentative "conversation."

- Doing so requires you to define the main questions at issue in the conversation; essentially, you should be able to define a spectrum of possible stands on those issues, indicating what place each source occupies on that spectrum. You might conclude your summaries with a paragraph or two in which you evaluate the sources, pointing out weaknesses in the arguments, identifying questions or details ignored by critics, and so on.

***Drafting without Sources***

- All of us often have a hard time figuring out what we think or want to write about a text once we've read other arguments about it. For this reason, you should write notes toward, or even actual drafts of, your essay before you read or begin to work with sources.
- Once you've done this, you should substitute the generic evaluation paragraphs of your secondary sources with paragraphs in which you begin to articulate the relationships between the arguments you've been sketching out and the arguments of the sources.
- Doing this will help you outline your plans for incorporating material from specific sources into your essay. This approach also ensures that you have your own independent arguments and don't allow your essay to devolve into reportage on the arguments of sources.

**NB:** None of this is to imply that our initial close readings of a text are in some sense "pure" until we "contaminate" ourselves by reading secondary sources; or, that conversations about a text are ancillary to our individual experiences of it rather than a potentially productive part of reading, thinking, and writing about literature. At the same time, as we've explored throughout this course, conversations are an integral part of the experience of literature and literature is an integral part of ongoing conversations.