

Discipline-Specific Writing Guide: Literature

Emphasized Writing Skills and Typical Assignments

Writing about literature requires **close reading** and **critical analysis** of primary texts, sometimes incorporating **synthesis** of external research and explanations of how that research helps to understand the primary text. *Close reading* involves careful attention to how the author's choices contribute to the text's effectiveness. *Critical analysis* requires students to **interpret** the text, focusing on a key issue and developing arguments to support this interpretation. Students should **use quotations** from the text to support their arguments, clearly articulating the relevance of the quotation to the analysis. Typical assignments include:

- Reflections
- Textual analyses
- Research papers
- Essay Exams

Some Key Questions to Guide Writing

Assignments may not directly require reflection on personal responses to or questions about a text, but awareness of these responses and questions can be helpful in finding a focus for critical analyses. These questions are other useful starting points:

- What is the primary interest of the piece?
- How does the author use language, tone, time, pace, point of view, imagery, symbols, or metaphor? What do these contribute to the text?
- What is the significance of the title, key phrases, or names of characters or places? What do these contribute to the text?
- What theme(s) or messages(s) does the text convey? What elements in the piece communicate or contribute to this?
- How are the characters described? Do they change throughout the story? Do they contrast each other? How do they see each other? What do they contribute to the text?
- What conflicts are apparent? (Physical, mental, moral...) How are they resolved? What is the purpose of these conflicts and resolutions?

Note: While summary is not an emphasized skill in analytical papers, it may help to summarize during the reading process in preparation of writing.

Preferred Patterns of Organization and Use of Headings

MLA does not provide specific organization or section heading requirements. Papers typically follow the **introduction, body, conclusion** format and should be organized in a logical fashion, by clearest flow of argument—not by following the plot or organization of the piece being analyzed. **The title and author of the primary text should appear in the thesis statement** and may be identified even earlier in the paper. The introduction may include a brief review of other literary critiques before the thesis statement.

Each paragraph in a critical essay should include evidence supporting the main point of the paragraph. Each of these **examples should be properly introduced, analyzed, and cited**. A good way to organize the paragraphs is to **begin with an example from the primary text** before including evidence from a secondary source.

Preferred Style, Tone, Terminology

- Write about literature in the present tense.
- Critical papers should be formal and written in third-person.
- Refer to “the reader” or “audience” rather than “I,” “we,” or “you” in formal papers.
- Reflections may be written in first-person.
- Short works, such as poems and short stories, are placed in quotation marks.
- Longer pieces, such as books and plays, are italicized.

Favored Research Methodologies

Library research is the primary type of research used for papers about literature.

Authoritative Sources/Evidence

Use of **evidence from the primary text** is essential when writing about literature. Other authoritative evidence includes **literary criticism, interviews, and historical or cultural documents** that will provide deeper understanding of the primary text.

Documentation Style

MLA (Modern Language Association)